



The Songbird of Wychwood

Author: *Isobel Starling*

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Description: London 1860

George Dancie

Music Hall performer George Dancie is famed for his for his risqué songs, characters, and costumes. In the guise of Miss Georgette George performs private shows, entertaining elite, queer clientele at a secluded mansion called Wychwood. During a party at the house, a newcomer catches Miss Georgette's eye. It appears the gentleman is just as enamored with her. But after a fairy tale waltz the mysterious new club member vanishes, and George doesn't even know his name.

Percy Harcourt

When editor and poet Percy Harcourt reads his late grandfathers final letter, he finds a deeper understanding of the man within the lines of hand-penned script. His grandfathers dying wish was that Percy should not be alone. And so, he provided the means for Percy to discretely seek out company— a numbered gold token that permits Percy to enter the elite underbelly of London and gain an invitation to Wychwood.

This book is a gay historical romance with saucy songs, hopeless romantics, a villain and a HEA.

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GEORGE DANCIE

I opened the oh-so-fancy gift box, drew back the layer of tissue paper, and gasped. The whalebone bodice inside the box was made with crimson silk and tiny embroidered flowers. I hurriedly removed it from the box and held it to my bare masculine chest, moving to and fro, my eyes sparkling with pleasure as I admired myself in the full-length mirror. I loved the feeling of the bodice against my skin and I wanted to know how tight it would be when the ribbons were tied.

My best friend Eloise Fields marched into our shared dressing room. “Oi! That's mine, you scamp! Don't be getting too fond of it!” she scolded, her cockney accent strong. “My beau brought me that—came all the way from Gay Paree, y’know.”

“Which one?” I asked.

In the mirror Eloise directed her gaze at me, and in the reflection, she pouted, confused by my question. “There’s only one Gay Paree,” she insisted.

“No, silly! Which beau? As soon as you come off stage there’s a line of coves at the door. Harold and me are beating them back with sticks,” I laughed.

“Well, yes. I suppose I gets more than my fair share of male attention,” she fluttered her hand as if it was a paper fan, and flashed her eyes.

Eloise’s mother was originally from Morocco and her father was a sailor who hailed from Rye in Sussex. She’d grown up in Lambeth, and even though I’d tried to teach her proper elocution Eloise couldn’t drop her strong cockney accent. She was a small,

exotic, caramel-skinned girl with startling ice blue eyes and close-cropped hair dyed platinum blonde. Eloise is twenty-two, she's a contortionist, and during her act she wears a barely decent costume, matched with a silk sequined cap and slippers. She dances in a sinfully erotic way and bends her lithe body into the most alarming shapes imaginable. It's quite the talent. Of course, the gents go crazy for her and deliver gifts to the stage door in the hope of getting a date.

I admired myself in the mirror again and met Eloise's gaze. "Can I borrow this? Just for tonight," I pleaded, my lashes fluttering as I tried a puppy-dog look to pull at her heart strings. "Please Lou! Miss Georgette's got a private show."

"Oh, go on then," she said reluctantly. "One night only! Gawd, George, you know I could never say no to that pretty face!" Her small soft palms gripped my cheeks as she turned my head and popped a kiss on the tip of my nose. I batted her away then grinned with relief that Eloise had said yes. Paired with a golden blonde wig and the dress I'd just finished sewing, this bodice would look spectacular. I put the beautiful whale bone bodice back in the gift box and put the lid on.

Eloise leaned her dainty backside against the dressing table. "So, where's this private show then? Is it the private , private show that you always come back from laden with goodies?"

"You'll have to wait and see," I replied cryptically.

"I can't believe you won't tell even little old me?" Eloise mirrored my earlier puppy dog expression and then launched a tickle attack.

"I'm your best friend. Tell me!" she demanded, laughing. I screamed as her bony fingers skated over my naked flesh and I backed away from her. Eloise Fields had the look of a mischievous devil in her eyes. She followed me as I laughed, and tried to escape. We ended up in a giggling heap on the red velvet chaise longue, the only item

of furniture in our dressing room that wasn't heaped with costumes, silk scarves, or gift boxes. Eloise wrapped her arms around my chest and snuggled her head into the nape of my neck.

After a moment of silence when all I could hear was the thrumming of my excited heart, Eloise spoke. "I wish you liked girls, George," she sighed dejectedly as she clung to me. "I always feel so safe with you."

I let out a breath. I knew what she meant. We were closer and more affectionate than some married couples, and don't get me wrong, I loved Eloise, but not in the way that Eloise wanted me to love her.

"Just you be safe at your private show is all. I don't want you getting into no trouble. I know what the private shows can be like. The men are even more feral when they get you alone and there's no one to protect you, not like here."

I patted my friend's hand, glad to have her looking out for me, but I was also unsettled by the weight of what she'd just said. Had something happened at one of her own private shows that she hadn't told me about? Eloise was fiercely independent. She took what she wanted from the men who plied her with gifts and she didn't suffer fools. She was determined to be in control of her destiny, and I admired her for it.

"Is someone giving you grief, love? You know I'm here if one of your gentlemen gets ideas you ain't into," I offered. Eloise pulled away and then stood up. She straightened her clothes and in a colder tone said,

"I can look after me-self!" Her sharp tone confused me, but before I could voice my concern she slapped my arse and said,

"Right, I'd best get to rehearsals. You bring my bodice back in one piece, you hear,

and I don't want no wine...or other stains on it!"

I placed a hand on my chest "I would never!" I gasped theatrically. We both laughed because we knew, given the chance, I most certainly would!

My mother, Violette D'Ancie, was originally from Paris. She told me she'd trained with Madame Vignon-Chauvin, one of the most sought-after costumiers in France. Violette had come to London to work as a theater costumier, but life hadn't turned out as she'd expected. Ma told me that for a start, London was more expensive than she'd thought, and so her savings dwindled fast. Eventually Violette made some friends with connections to the theater. But not long after, she fell pregnant with me. I had no idea who my dad was, but my ma was a looker and I gather that a talented, beautiful French girl new to London must have turned a few heads!

When I was a nipper we never stayed in one place for long, but I grew up around theater people, from those that mopped the stage, limelighters, and riggers to musicians, actors, and actresses. When I was eleven, we finally found a home at the Middlesex Music Hall on Drury Lane in the heart of Covent Garden. The proprietor, Mr. Alfred Grayson was quite the impresario and I believe he had a soft spot for my mum. Mr. Grayson let Violette and I live rent free in one of the rooms above the auditorium. Ma just paid for fuel and food, which was quite the rare agreement if you ask me. And now I come to think about it, maybe everything wasn't as above board as I'd thought when I was a kiddie. I don't know if anything happened between Grayson and my mum, I was a nipper at the time so what would I know of the goings on when I was in bed? Whatever arrangement they had, ma did it to ensure we had a roof over our heads, and she got regular costume work. All I remember was that Mr. Grayson was nice to me and he kept me busy in the theater. I'd run errands and help with props and painting scenery while Violette sewed costumes for productions all over London.

Ma spoke to me in English and French, and she made sure I learned to speak and write in both languages. Our orchestra conductor at the time, Mr. Otto Franz taught me how to read and write music. I loved it so much that I started writing songs in private. By the age of fifteen I was a jack-of-all-trades and I'd probably had a go at every job in the theater, apart from being the compere. That was where Mr. Grayson was in his element, using his silver tongue to pull the punters in and keep them wanting more!

Ma told me that my first stage performance was when I was just three-years-old. I can't recall which theater we were at, all I remember is that she dressed me up like a little girl and I had to skip onto the stage and be a nuisance during a comedy act. I remember it vividly. I swear, the first time I got a reaction and hundreds of punters roared with laughter cos of something I did, I knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my days. I loved the attention, and as I grew up I found I was good at mimicking what I saw other performers do.

Life was grand at our music hall; we were a family of sorts. And then, my world came crashing down when my mum got sick with Influenza and passed away. I was so sudden; she was sick for a few days and then she was gone. I was sixteen when I became an orphan. Ma never told me who'd fathered me, and with her gone I didn't know what I would do. Mr. Grayson took pity on me and said I could stay in our room above the auditorium.

"I won't see Violet's boy out on the streets, and you know what, it's always a comfort to know someone's in the theater at all times. You can be my watchdog, George. You can make sure the ghost light stays lit and all," he'd joked as he ruffled my curls. I hadn't laughed, but was so grateful to keep our room. I promised to be good, look after the theater out of hours, and I'd keep working hard.

It takes a lot of work to put on a play, but once the first night's done muscle memory takes over and it's a doddle. Putting on music hall show is a different kind of animal.

We have comedians, ventriloquists, aerial acts, jugglers, illusionists, singers, and dancers. We have to keep the show fresh so our punters come back time and time again. Our stage manager Arthur Formby says it's like conducting chaos.

With all of the lifting and carrying I did each day helping around the theater, by eighteen, I was starting to put on a little muscle. I'd grown up into a tall, athletic young man. I had mousy brown wavy hair and golden-brown eyes, just like my mum.

I recall the day I got my break as if it was yesterday. Arthur had a strange twinkle in his eyes when he told me that Mr. Grayson wanted to see me in his office. I was worried cos that was never a good thing. I wracked my brain, wondering what I could have done wrong. When Violette had passed, Grayson's attitude towards me changed. He became colder, and these past few years he'd hardened somewhat towards me. I hated Grayson's office. It was as messy as a rubbish heap and stank of stale old man and tobacco. The walls used to be white at one time, but Grayson seemed to let the upkeep of the whole theater go when he didn't have my ma to impress. Now, the office walls had a sickly yellow tobacco stain and the lead paint was bubbling and peeling in places. Mr. Grayson spent more and more time locked in his office these days, and I assumed he was planning tours for his travelling acts and dealing with finding new blood for our show. Apparently, Mr. Grayson had a wife, two kiddies, and a nice house just outside of town, but you wouldn't think it as he was always out and about. I found the office door was open and so I walked in to see him sitting behind his messy desk "You asked to see me boss," I said. Mr. Grayson glanced up from his ledger.

"I've had a grand idea, lad. Just a tick," Grayson said holding his hand up to make me wait until he'd finished writing. I stood quietly before his desk curious to hear what this idea was. The desk was a catastrophe, loaded with paperwork, invoices, receipts, and several thick ledgers. His secretary had walked out a few months ago and so far, there was no replacement. It was a regular occurrence but I could understand why secretaries didn't want to work in close quarters with a greasy old cove like Alfred

Grayson!

When my boss put his pen down and looked up he said “Georgie,” with fake affection. I hated it when anyone called me Georgie. ‘ Mon petit Georgie’ that was what mum used to call me, and so hearing that name reminded me that she wasn’t here anymore. It made me miss her something awful. I gritted my teeth and listened to my boss.

He sat back in his chair and considered me with dangerous eyes. “I bet you don’t think anyone hears you when you’re standing in the wings singing along with the acts.” I felt heat rise to blush my cheeks. I was so embarrassed that I’d been called to Mr. Grayson’s office for this !

“I bet you don’t think anyone hears you playing that old piano in your room, neither. I do. I see, and hear everything that goes on in this theater, my lad!”

I was mortified and my eyes fell to try and discern the pattern that was still faintly visible on the old worn carpet beneath my feet.

“Don’t be shy, boy! You’ve got quite the singing voice,” Grayson added with condescending amusement. “And you can’t be doing odds and sods around the theater all your life. It’s about time you got your act together.”

I didn’t understand. Was I finally out on my ear? “P...pardon?” I said, shocked and a little terrified of what he would say next.

“The stage, boy, the stage!”

Oh! I’d longed to be a performer on the stage, but I knew which side my bread was buttered, and I’d worried that if I got on Mr. Grayson’s nerves by asking to perform, he might finally kick me out. And so, I was dumbstruck by what he said next.

“I’ll give you a trial, let’s say a week, you go on as a warm-up act and sing something pretty to get the punters in the mood. I’ll pay you an extra shilling per night. How does that sound?”

I was currently on a three bob a week for being a jack-of-all-trades, and of course, I was the night watchman too!

“Yes, yes, thank you Mr. Grayson...thank you for the opportunity. I won’t let you down, sir!” I stuttered with delight. I walked out of his office feeling like I was ten foot tall.

And so, I started my time as a music hall performer by singing a few popular songs each night as filler between the main star attractions. The reception I got was muted at first, but good enough that Grayson let me keep it going. And I did.

I’d done the warm up spots, singing other people’s songs, for two-years before I got bored and finally decided on a new direction. Those two-years were my schooling, and now I was ready to bloom. For my new act I’d created characters, and matched them with songs that I wrote myself. I’d always been told I could pass for a girl so for my first turn I was dressed like a Catholic nun character I called Sister John Thomas. I began by walking on stage in a nun’s costume. I stood in the middle of the stage, blessed myself, and opened a hymn book. The audience appeared shocked and confused. And to my amusement, some even started booing. Then, I began belting out a well-known song, Oh, How the Money Rolls in , with a few changes to the lyrics I’d penned myself.

My brother’s a rent boy in Chelsea

My mother’s a tart in the Strand

My father sells his arsehole

Up the Elephant and Castle

And charges just tu'ppence a hand

My uncle's a vicar in Stepney

Saving all the young girls from sin

He'll sell you absolution for a shilling

And oh, how the money rolls in, rolls in,

And oh, how the money rolls in!

The punters sang along and laughed so hard at my vulgar lyrics that they nearly brought the roof down. That night when I came off stage Mr. Grayson looked at me all funny, like there were stars in his eyes.

"I think you've found your calling Sister," he joked as he clapped me on the back, and he was right. Finally, I was doing what I was supposed to do.

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PERCY HARCOURT

I was startled from my musings by an ear-splitting scream. My nib skidded across the page, spraying ink over my newly penned poem. Dear God! What is it now mother? My mother had a taste for the dramatics and a reaction like this could be caused by anything as simple as spilling her tea or seeing a spider. I put my pen down and wiped my inky fingers on a damp cloth and then, driven by frustration I marched from my room. I hurried down three flights of stairs to where I heard a commotion coming from my grandfather's study. The hysterical wailing and raised voices continued. The words I heard shared between grandfather and my mother took the fire from my anger and chilled me to the bone.

"I will not have my business ruined by that mountebank, Valentine. He has gone too far this time, too damn far," Grandfather ranted.

"But Theodore, you cannot go through with this, surely you must know that duels are illegal? And it is so...unbecoming of a man of your station," Mother cried.

"I do not care about the legalities, Evangeline. This about honour, and it's about time Valentine learned what that word means! A duel is how my father sorted out disputes and his father before him. Our family has a notoriously good eye for the shot. I will shut that blaggard down once and for all, you'll see my dear daughter-in-law, you'll see!" Grandfather sounded pleased with himself, almost relieved that whatever he had planned was afoot.

My father piped in then, "Very well Papah, if you are determined to go through with this, as your second it is my duty to inform the other party where and when the duel

will take place.”

“The sooner the better, I say!” Grandfather said decisively.

My hand rose to cover my mouth as I lingered outside the door. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Very well, tomorrow at sunrise, Greenwich Park, between the old oaks.”

“Thank you, Victor, you are the best son I could have wished for.”

Mother wept louder. I couldn’t believe what I had just overheard. This was utter madness. I inhaled to settle my nerves and then knocked on the study door.

“Enter,” Grandfather called. I stepped into the room to see my stalwart father standing by the mantle in a good suit, puffing on a cigar. Mother still wore her coat and hat, as if she had rushed straight into the study on arriving home from her Guardians of the Poor charity meeting. She was slumped in a hearth chair in a most undignified way, weeping and glaring at my grandfather in disbelief. Theodore Harcourt was sitting erect at his desk looking like the bullish businessman he was.

Blackwood Hall in Greenwich was the family’s London home. My grandfather had designed and built it from the wealth of his publishing empire. The Harcourt Press began in 1830 as Harcourt and you know full-well that it has an extensive national readership and an excellent reputation. Valentine’s new ha’penny rag is to be named The Gazette . He refuses to change it. This is unconscionable.”

Edmund Valentine was once grandfather’s dearest friend. They began their newspaper business together, hence the original name of Harcourt so maybe it was a gaming counter? Confused, I settled back and read:

“ My dearest Percy,

What I’m about to tell you is deeply private. I ask that after reading this letter you burn it so the contents will not bring shame upon the family.”

Well, as opening paragraphs went, this was both alarming and intriguing. I reached for the glass of claret, took a gulp for courage, and then continued.

“It grieves me to write to you in this manner, but I must face the fact that no matter the outcome of the duel, I am at the end of my days and will soon be with my maker. Whoever succeeds, neither Edmund nor I will have won satisfaction in this life.

I have many regrets, but my primary regret is that I did not extend the hand of peace to dear Edmund sooner. You see, it may shock you to learn that Edmund and I had a friendship that secretly stepped beyond the bounds of propriety. I loved him most dearly, more than anyone I’ve ever known, and he loved me in return. We loved in a way we both felt was completely natural, but society and the church would never see it that way.

We did not endeavor upon a physical love until after your grandmother passed away. I was in a state of the deepest grief when I lost Florence, and Edmund offered me comfort. We became entwined in all areas of life and kept the secret of our shared inversion. I cherished those years with him by my side and, you may think it scandalous, but also in my bed. I would not change what we shared for all of the riches in the world.

Our falling out was unexpected and deeply hurtful. Looking back after all these years it sounds childish, and I regret allowing things to become so muddled. You see, men like us cannot marry, and if discovered our love would lead us to prison or the gibbet. Edmund suggested that as we could not marry, we should make our partnership official in another way, by making him part owner on the deeds of Harcourt however,

my passion was for poetry, and I was determined to experience life just like the romantic poets whose work I obsessed over throughout my youth. I too wanted to be able to express the truth of my heart.

Ordinarily, unless a letter was marked as private, my secretary would open the mail and pile it on my in-tray according to urgency. I was grateful she had missed one particular envelope. The letter in question stood out because of the attractive handwriting penned in purple ink. Maybe she thought it was a love letter, or an invitation. I locked my office door before returning to my desk, picking up the letter opener, and slitting the envelope. There were two sheets of paper within. First, I read that the next soirée for something called Club Fifty-Five would occur on Friday, this Friday in fact. A coach would collect me from Blackwood Hall at six p.m. and take me to the event.

The second sheet of paper listed the rules of Club Fifty-Five. Members did not share names, instead each had a number, and hence, the gold token my grandfather left me which was engraved with the number 36. Members were not permitted to bring guests. All intimacy that occurred at the event was to be consensual. The most important rule was that no one was permitted to mention Club Fifty-Five or share its location; for the safety of all who attended. Breaking the rules would lead to banishment from the club and any man who revealed the nature or address of the establishment would have a campaign ruination set against them. I understood the need for secrecy and the threat of ruination. As directed, I burned both letters after reading. This was all very cloak and dagger, but I must admit I was intrigued. It was my grandfather's dying wish for me to attend. What exactly did gentlemen get up to at Club Fifty-Five?

I was about to find out!

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MISS GEORGETTE

It was just after six in the evening on a stinking foggy March night, and here in Leicester Square it was business as usual with a motley collection of aristocrats, middle, and working-class coves all looking for a good time. I had a private show to attend, not as a guest, oh no. Tonight, I was booked to entertain a group of very select gentlemen as the songbird, Miss Georgette.

A Clarence carriage pulled up outside of the Alhambra building on the east side of the square. The door was opened from the inside by my partner-in-crime, Mr. Alfonse Hugo. I darted out from my place under the theater awning and stepped in to the carriage, pulling my cloak around me. I sat, and arranged my skirts as Mr. Hugo closed the door. Then he knocked on the roof to alert the coachman and we moved off into the line of carriages leaving the square.

Mr. Hugo was a short man with a round moon face. He was wearing a heavy moleskin coat and had bowler hat, which, when he removed it showed an over-pomaded head that made it appear as if his sparse black hair had been painted onto his scalp.

“My, my you are looking rather lovely tonight George. Is that a new bodice?” Mr. Hugo enquired his accent German.

“Why, thank you kind sir,” I fawned and fanned my hand theatrically. “It is indeed a new bodice, but it ain’t mine, it’s a loan from a friend. I’ve orders not to get any...substances on it!” We snickered knowingly. With the bodice I wore a gorgeous red silk and lace gown with a pannier cage underskirt for shaping. I’d sewn the gown

myself with the much-prized new Singer sewing machine Mr. Grayson had recently invested a fair few bob on, after the old one was broken beyond repair. The gown matched beautifully with the French bodice. When my cloak was off, it would display my powdered pale flat upper chest...and if the gents were lucky, they'd get a peek of nipple too! My face was fine featured and considered pretty for a man. My makeup displayed my feminine side, but there was no need to pretend I had breasts. That wasn't what these gents favoured at all. I wore lace gloves and a shawl for later in the night when it would get colder. Apart from Eloise's bodice, my favourite part of my costume was the boots. I'd used my first two wages packets from this particular private arrangement to have a cobbler make feminine boots to fit my wide manly feet! The boots were a copy of an Italian pair I'd seen in a Regent Street shop window display. They were red leather and silk embroidered with flowers and they had a tapered high heel. The boots went up past my ankles and the laces tied at the back. I loved how my calves appeared so shapely in turquoise blue silk stockings and these boots.

We were on our way to a mansion in Primrose Hill, but first off, we had one more stop to make. A fellow by the name of Mr. Joshua was waiting on the corner outside a grand house at number 1 Portland Place in Westminster. Neither Mr. Hugo nor I knew if he worked, or even lived there. But this was the instruction on where to pick him up on the way to our destination.

The fog didn't make locating him easy, but Mr. Joshua was a wise fellow and he stood beneath the nearest street lamp. The carriage pulled up and Mr. Joshua nodded solemnly in greeting as he stepped in and took his seat beside Mr. Hugo. He removed his bowler hat and placed it on his lap then tapped the roof to tell the coachman to move on. Mr. Joshua was a quiet man who had an air of authority about him. He looked to be in his fourth decade but along with round brass spectacles, he wore a dark brown beard that made him appear older than his years. I knew from our previous acquaintances that beneath the heavy wool coat there was the smart, tidy suit of a servant.

We continued on our journey toward Primrose Hill to a mysterious old mansion called Wychwood. Club Fifty-Five was a secretive, anonymous affair for gentlemen with particular, illegal tastes, and so there were strict rules of membership. The bordellos and molly houses in town were always raided by the Peelers, and so Wychwood was a perfect location, inconspicuous, on the outskirts of town, virtually in the countryside, yet it took less than an hour to get there by carriage from Covent Garden. My job was to sing while Mr. Hugo accompanied on the piano. Another fellow named Felix set up the house before we arrived, and before him a team of maids cleaned the house and made the beds. Mr. Joshua attended the door during the party and ensured the gents who arrived were of the select fifty-five members. He knew every face and checked each attendee's gold token. No one was getting into the house without his say so. Men like us have so few places we can be ourselves and so when we find one, we're protective of it and of those who join us there.

None of us who worked at Wychwood knew who our employer was. This was for our and their protection as sodomy's a hanging offence, but don't get me started on what an arse that particular law is, especially when those that made the laws were all at it!

My Wychwood letters were hand delivered to the stage door of the music hall, although I'd never seen who delivered them. And to ensure secrecy we were paid well for our work and our silence. I was paid five pounds for a turn at Wychwood, which was a month's wage at the music hall. I enjoyed entertaining gentlemen who preferred gentlemen and the hopeless romantic in me loved seeing gents being openly affectionate in a place where they didn't have to fear discovery.

Mr. Hugo and I were curious about our quiet compatriot, Mr. Joshua. We'd talked privately wondering about who he was and where he'd come from, but neither of us had been able to identify the particular livery of the household he belonged to, or what his day job was. Occasionally, Felix conversed with us after his work was done. He once told me that he had the suspicion that Mr. Joshua worked in the home of our employer and he attended the Club Fifty-Five not only to keep watch at the door, but

to ensure that his master's wishes were carried out to the letter! I don't know if that's true, but it would make a lot of sense.

Alfonse Hugo was a pianist at The Great Western Royal Hotel in Paddington. He arranged his nights off to coincide with this private booking. Hugo brought a portfolio book full of music manuscripts with him and during our journey he and I nattered about our set list. I didn't sing any of the songs I performed at the music hall, but I was a quick study and we'd have time to run through a new song or two before the house opened.

Mr. Joshua always sat quietly with his thoughts as Hugo and I jabbered on. As we passed Regents Park, and same as always, Mr. Joshua checked his pocket watch and then slipped a hand into his jacket and retrieved two envelopes.

"Your wages," he said as passed one to Mr. Hugo and one to me.

I placed the envelope into an inner pocket of my cloak. "Thank you, sir, much obliged." I said, truly grateful, cos this was the only private party I worked at that ever paid the performers in advance. It made me feel like I was a trusted confidant. Our employer put his faith in us to ensure a night at Wychwood was as pleasurable as the clients desired and we'd keep schtum.

I took a glance out of the window but apart from the occasional gas street lamp haloed in mist or a ghostly figure walking in the fog, I couldn't see much of any detail, but I felt it when the horses began their assent, pulling the carriage up the inclined roadway on the outskirt of the wild heath. I'd come up to Primrose Hill during the summer to picnic with Eloise, and we found it was a pretty wilderness with swathes of wild flowers. On a rare clear day, the view across London was spectacular. Lou and I had laughed a lot, watching grown men running around with butterfly nets trying to catch butterflies for their collections and ending up on their arses. But that lovely day was now a memory and the greedy developers who were

expanding the city had their eyes on Primrose Hill.

Watching through the window I finally saw the muted light of lanterns that signaled the turn into the driveway for Wychwood. When the carriage stopped moving Mr. Hugo closed his portfolio of music, and then he opened the door. A fierce chill rushed in. Hugo alighted first and offered me his hand for support as I stepped down. I gathered my cloak around me and my teeth chattered. Mr. Joshua placed his bowler hat on his head and followed us out of the carriage. He turned to the coachman and said.

“Be back by 2 a.m.” The coachman doffed his flat cap, “Right you are, sir,” then he drove the horses down the driveway and around to the rear of the property where there was a stable block. My guess was he’d settle in for a nap, or even have a game of cards with the other coachmen delivering their elite gentlemen to the house.

Mr. Hugo checked his pocket watch and nodded. He then he stepped up to the door and lifted the heavy lion-faced knocker, banging it twice. We heard a responding double knock from the other side of the door. Hugo then knocked three times, then once. Seemingly satisfied, Felix unlocked the huge door and welcomed us inside. We all hurried in to the warm house and Felix closed the door.

“It is a stinker out zhere tonight, Felix,” Mr. Hugo exclaimed rubbing his leather-gloved hands together. Hugo put his portfolio book down between his feet to remove his heavy moleskin coat, revealing a green velvet jacket, white shirt, and cravat with smart black trousers. I was relieved to get inside too cos it was a freezing night and apart from silk stockings and French knickers I was naked beneath the dress.

“My bleedin’ balls have retreated in fear of the cold,” I snickered. “I’ll have to sing some bawdy songs to get the blood pumping down there again!”

“You always sing bawdy songs! That’s why you keep getting invited back!” Felix

reminded which made us all laugh. I strode across the hall to the mirror to check that I was as pristine as when Eloise had pinned my wig and painted my face. I was made up with white greasepaint stage make up, and then powdered. Eloise had rouged my cheeks, and painted my lips with deep carmine red so I looked like a doll. To complete the look, over my natural mousy brown hair I wore a blonde wig of girlish ringlets with a feather adornment. The finishing touch was a squirt of heady Violet de Parme perfume. On removing my cloak, I finally revealed my full costume and did a twirl for my fellow collaborators in this illegal party.

“Ooh, very fetching, Miss Georgette. You’ll certainly get ‘em going tonight!” Felix smiled. I curtsied in response. “A girl does what she can!”

I handed my cloak to Mr. Joshua, who also collected Mr. Hugo’s coat and strode towards the cloak room. On returning to the hall he instructed “Places please, boys and girls!” and then took his spot by the front door in anticipation of our first guest.

Alfonse Hugo and I headed for the dining room, and my goodness, I salivated at the buffet display Felix had set up for the gents. On the long mahogany dining table there were platters of freshly baked bread, cheeses, meats, and exotic fruits from warmer climes like grapes, melon, and pineapple that I’d never seen before coming to Wychwood. And then there were the plates piled high with French pastries, and confectionary. Against the far wall there was a cabinet that held enough bottles of booze to sink a ship, and a credenza where there were glasses. I knew that I wasn’t supposed to pick from the display as Felix was quite the artiste. I’d eat my fill later in the night when the gents were up to other business! But, my one weakness was pineapple. Pineapples were worth a bloomin’ fortune and I’d heard stories from years back of them being so prized that a solitary pineapple would be paraded around the town, taken from soirée to soirée to be displayed and admired, but never eaten. There was even a good trade in renting out a pineapple to pretend that you were richer than you were. And so, even though they were a little more common these days, it was always a decadent delight to see the fruit cut up to be eaten. I felt self-indulgent as I

pinched a thin slice from a display and shoved it into my mouth, sighing as the sweet juice flowed down my throat.

“Oi, that ain’t for you missy!” Felix scolded.

“It’s not as if the nobs’ll miss it, there’s plenty of other things for them to eat,” I snickered crudely, pulling up my skirt and flashing the frilly pink French knickers. Felix slapped my arse and laughed with us. Then he said his goodbyes cos now that his job was done, it was time for him to go and let us get on with the entertaining.

Alfonse opened double doors from the dining room that led to the lavish music room. This room had magnificent acoustics. There were beautiful murals on the walls of instruments entwined with flowers and fat baby cherubs. Chairs were arranged around the outskirts of the room leaving an open floor where the fellows could dance together. Mr. Hugo took his seat at a wonderful grand piano, and I joined him, warming up my voice by singing scales, finally banishing the silence from Wychwood.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:00 pm

PERCY

The carriage arrived exactly as the mysterious letter had informed. I trusted that my late-grandfather would not lead me astray; although where the coachman was taking me I still did not know. The night was bitter and foggy, making visibility difficult. I stared out of the window trying to get my bearings. I knew that we'd crossed the River Thames and I repeatedly glanced at my pocket watch to check how long the journey was taking, but it wasn't until fifty minutes later that I saw a street lamp beside a large sign for London Zoo. I garnered then that we were on Regents Park Road and heading uphill toward Primrose Hill.

We finally turned up a private driveway and paused in front of a huge mysterious mansion house. I remained anxious and intrigued as I stepped out of the carriage, and then passed a tip to the silent coachman. The carriage moved away down the drive vanishing into the fog and I paused in the courtyard, looking up, and taking in the huge old mansion. The name plate beside the door read: Wychwood. The window drapes were drawn, yet shafts of warm yellow light snuck from between gaps in the fabric. I heard the laughter of men, piano music, and a singer. This piqued my interest. I loved music and tried to attend the theater or a recital at least twice a week. Using the huge lion knocker, I knocked and the door was swiftly opened revealing a grand brightly lit foyer of checkerboard tiles and stylish décor. The mixed scents of Patchouli, alcohol and fine cigar smoke wafted out. I was met by a fellow in his middle years with a well-groomed beard, spectacles, and the erect posture of a servant. The butler introduced himself as Mr. Joshua.

“Do you have a token, sir?” he asked stiffly.

“Ah, yes, yes.” I fished in my waistcoat pocket and retrieved the gold token left to me by my grandfather. I gave it to the butler.

He glanced at it, nodded, and then passed the token back to me and I returned it to the waistcoat pocket. “36, come in, sir.” The butler moved aside and I stepped into Wychwood.

“Please accept the deepest condolences of the house for your loss, sir. I do hope you find the peace and comfort your grandfather found within these walls,” Mr. Joshua said in a smooth cultured accent.

I was rather moved to learn that this man whom I’d assumed was a mere servant knew that Theo had enjoyed attending these gatherings of likeminded men.

“Please, let me take your coat and then I shall give you the tour.”

I removed my outerwear, offering the garments to Mr. Joshua who took them to the cloak room. Two middle-aged gentlemen passed through the foyer holding hands as they walked together. At seeing their clasped hands, a feeling of warmth and of acceptance washed over me. The men paused to kiss one another on the mouth, not just a peck, but a deep, passionate French style kiss. My stomach twisted with arousal as one of the men opened his eyes during the act and shot a lustful glare at me. Ashamed for staring, I sent my gaze to my feet.

The sounds of frivolity and laughter were all around and although some may have thought me a prig, I was not averse to enjoying myself. I was just selective about my entertainments. I liked to go out, to dine, and dance, as well as enjoying my intellectual and artistic pursuits. But it was my attraction to men and intimate company that was the need I could not fulfill within my social circle. But here at Wychwood I was surrounded by men of my class who had the same preference as I, and it was strangely freeing to not feel that knot of discomfort in my belly with the

fear of finding a man attractive and having my advance rebuffed or ridiculed.

“Come along sir,” Mr. Joshua called. I followed on behind him as he proceeded to take me on a tour of the gaming room, the library, and the smoking room, where I saw the members were having a great deal of fun. He explained that should I find an agreeable partner there were bedrooms available for use upstairs. Oh, to share my deviant desires with a lithe, willing young man. That was the stuff of dreams! Even the thought of it made my bollocks ache. But I didn’t want to get ahead of myself. I’d never done this before, but I decided it would be nice to find a gentleman I was attracted to, who was also drawn to me. I’d talk with him, and discover our commonalities. Anything else would come naturally, or so I hoped.

Mr. Joshua led me to the dining room where an exceptional buffet spread was to be had, as well as copious amounts of wine and spirits. I’d heard the singer before I saw her, and I did not miss the vulgar innuendo of the lyrics she sang that had guests laughing and singing along. Her voice was lovely, like pink cherry blossom in the wind on a spring morn, and it seemed to follow me on my tour of the house. I was immediately intrigued, but when I saw her...saw him, dressed in ladies garments looking so disarmingly ravishing I felt a little drunk before I’d even touched a drop. My goodness! I was transfixed. Maybe Theo and Edmund were smiling down on me, because I now understood why grandfather left the gold token for me. I knew what I liked when I saw it, and by the muses, the heated curl of arousal in my groin told me something about myself I hadn’t known before. I liked a man in women’s garments, and in particular, this pretty songbird had set me aflame.

MISS GEORGETTE

The only way to survive as a performer in a house full of licentious queer gents is to appeal to their darker, saucier side. And so the character of Miss Georgette was designed to be supremely confident and aimed to cater to the members desire to have fun. She was the madam, the coquette, the virgin and the whore all rolled into one.

I figured the night would proceed much the same as always. The club members would arrive, met by Mr. Joshua. The gents were all elites. Dukes, judges, bankers, and politicians. There could even be a prince among them for all I knew. We offered much to do for the evening. I'd always begin the entertainment with jaunty popular music hall numbers that I knew got gentlemen in a merry mood. They were here for pleasure, so they ate, drank, and requested particular songs that I would sing and encourage them to join in and sing along. Several men went upstairs and changed into ladies' garments as soon as they arrived. Some used the gaming room for billiards, cards, and board games. Others puffed on fragrant cigars in the smoking room and conversed. As the evening drew in I'd sing slower, more romantic songs, and fellows would take their beau to the dance floor for a cuddle as they swayed to the music before they would head to the bedrooms to get their pleasures met. I loved watching gentlemen dancing together. It was something that they would never be able to do it at any of the society balls. A simple dance with a fellow was so precious, yet so taboo. Some of these men were like me, desperate romantics in want of love, and not just sex. They held one another earnestly close, swaying to the piano melody and not caring about the dances of the season or propriety. It brought a tear to my eye at times, cos it reminded me that I was lonely and I too wished for a beau of my own.

I never went with any of the gents who attended Wychwood. Miss Georgette was a

coquette. She didn't mind a flirt, and on the occasion of an invitation to dance, took a turn around the floor with a fellow or two, but I wasn't a rent boy! Mr. Joshua made it clear when we first met that intimacy with guests was against the rules for performers. He had a keen eye and I wouldn't risk this job for a suck or a tumble.

That was what I'd thought before I saw the newcomer. He'd arrived alone and stood in the wide doorway between the dining room and music room watching me perform. I'd given him a saucy wink and did a little dance as I sang a favourite of my gents called 'I hope the Peeler's don't pass by'. He looked ever so handsome in his tailcoat with bright green eyes trained on me, and an untamed mop of straw blond curls. He smiled warmly, and smoothed his fingers over his fair moustache and he applauded enthusiastically when I finished the song. Then he was gone and I felt a little bereft, I couldn't understand why. I sang another song and then I did a turn of the ground floor of the house going room to room to flirt and ensure the gents were having a good time. I saw the newcomer in the gaming room. He looked up from his hand of cards and it could have been my imagination, but I was sure his emerald green eyes sparkled when he saw me. He pushed all of his coins into the center of the table to join a big pile of sovereigns. His opponent laid his hand down and believing he'd won, and moved to pull his winnings closer. But my new gent grinned at his opponent and then displayed his hand. He had the winning the hand, for a Royal Flush cannot be beaten. The men observing the game roared in delight and slapped him on the back. He gathered the pile of gold sovereigns he'd just won and began stacking them. Then he picked up a coin, and tossed it to me. Shocked by his generosity I snatched it from the air. I popped the coin in a pocket I'd sewn into the skirt for this very reason! I blew a kiss to the blond gentleman, and then I left the gaming room and continued to circulate and flirt before returning to the music room for my next song.

Mr. Hugo and I had decided on a set of waltzes that would bring gents to dance. The new man arrived in the music room half way through the first waltz. He took a glass of claret and a plate of food and while gentlemen twirl together, he seated himself,

watching me as if he was at a recital. It was clear to me that, as this gentleman was new; one of the other members had been barred for breaking the rules, or had died as they were the only ways a new man would be admitted to the club. The new fellow was approached twice while I performed but the gents soon moved on when it was clear he wasn't interested in anything more than a natter. I had a liking for lost sheep and this fellow looked a little out of his depth. During my next break I took a drink with several swells, flirted, and shared a ribald story or two. Mr. Joshua sidled up to me at one point to check all was well.

“What's the number of our newcomer?” I enquired gesturing to the handsome blond man who had given me the generous tip.

“He's the new number 36.”

“What happened to the old number 36?”

“He lost a duel.”

“Ahh.” That must have been a nasty business. 36 weren't socializing; he sat alone in the music room appearing lost in his thoughts as Mr. Hugo played. How was he going to meet a fellow for a bit of comfort if he didn't speak to no one? I clutched my shawl and went back in.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:00 pm

PERCY

I paused in the doorway between the dining and music room and leaned against the doorjamb. I watched her as she sang, urging her to look in my direction so I could catch her eye. To my utter astonishment she did so, and when our gazes collided sparks flew in my heart, the likes of which I'd never felt before. I was at once, smitten. She gave me a saucy smile and after a familiar piano accompaniment, the songbird launched into a bawdy song I recognized about a lady of the night. This song had decidedly saucy lyrics.

“A man of high society

In search of some variety,

The kind of cove to catch my eye

In pubs and clubs and in the streets

A gentleman will prowl, you see,

Looking for a girl like I!

I find my man and he finds me

I'll take him to a dark alley

And in the throes, he says to me?”

The club members then joined in and heartily sang along with the chorus.

“I hope the Peelers don’t pass by, girl,

I hope the Peelers don’t pass by.

Let me whet me whistle,

Before they blows their own.

Oh, I hope the Peelers don’t pass by—”

We all howled with laughter at the songbird’s performance filled with lewd gestures. I couldn’t help nodding my head and tapping my foot as I was pulled along by the melody. Gentlemen danced together to the jaunty tune, clutching one another in the same way men danced with women, which, in any other setting would be scandalous and lead to social banishment, even arrest. I’d never even dared imagining I could dance with a fellow in that way and decided that it was something I would like to try. But, as the song came to an end and I vigorously applauded, it was time for a drink and to see what other fun could be had at Wychwood.

The gaming room was my next port of call. On the way down the corridor I heard moaning and whimpering noises, and then happened upon a couple in an alcove. An older man was on his knees with a younger man who was pressed to the wall. His eyes were closed as the other gamahuched him. I’d never seen the act up close like this before. My initial reaction was to be scandalized. But no, this was a space where men could be themselves with one another. This, I came to see, was the point of a house like Wychwood. I paused for a second and watched as the younger man’s stiff prick slipped effortlessly in and out of his partner’s wet puffy lips. By the

whimpering and groaning I understood that there was mutual pleasure to be had in the experience and again, my bollocks ached with desire. I licked my lips and then moved on, desperately needing something else to steal my attention.

In the games room I joined a game of poker with three other fellows, sadly, none of whom were attractive to me. They introduced themselves by their numbers, 14, 9, 22 and I told them I was 36. Feeling bold, I fished a twenty-pound note from my wallet which was exchanged with Mr. Joshua for twenty gold sovereigns to use as gaming counters. Then I settled in to the first game.

We'd played several hands and I hadn't done too badly so far. The clock struck half-past-eight and I kept my features emotionless as I shielded my cards. It was only Mr. 22 and I left now. He was one of the more comely, boyish members of Club Fifty-Five, appearing even younger than my twenty-six years. He eyeballed me, and I could see he was trying to make my measure. His tongue popped out and he licked a sultry path to moisten his lips. I wondered if he fancied his chances with me in one of the bedrooms upstairs or if the lip-licking was a purposeful distraction to put me off my game. It was then that I truly was distracted. I looked up to see other gents had crowded around the table, and among the crowd was the songbird. Our eyes met and she beamed at me. Fireworks exploded in my chest. That smile gave me joy and confidence. Again, I glanced at the hand I was dealt. I knew I could not lose, and so pushed my remaining coins into the pile matching my opponent's wager. He sent me a sly smile and laid his cards out. He had a Straight Flush of diamonds 6,7,8,9. He grinned self-satisfied and made to reach for his winnings but then I laid down my cards, ace, king, queen, jack, and ten of hearts, an unbeatable Royal Flush. The room was in uproar and I was slapped on the back and told what a jolly good job I'd done. I felt warm and accepted by these new friends, apart from by my opponent. His once sultry mouth took on a waspish moue. He rose and stalked away from the table. I gathered my winnings and began to stack them. I still could not help but be distracted by the songbird. I tossed a coin to her and she plucked it from the air showing impressive dexterity, then in return she blew me a kiss. This was already one of the

best nights-out I'd had in a long time.

Mr. Joshua then came back into the gaming room and I swapped out my gold sovereigns for a stack of notes. "I can put this in the safe for you. And you can collect it before you leave," he offered. I was happy with that arrangement as I didn't want to spend the evening with an overfilled wallet.

Music and song drew me in again like a moth to a flame. I was now sure that there was a thread connected from my soul to the songbird. I returned to the dining room, loaded a plate with bread; meats, cheese, and fruit, and then poured myself a glass of claret. I took a seat in the music room and watched with delight as the songbird sang and danced.

The more I watched her, the more I became enchanted. I wanted to know her name and who she was. And so, it shocked me when, later in the evening, she came over and asked to sit beside me and converse.

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MISS GEORGETTE

“Good evening sir, may I take a seat?” I said and to my shock the gentleman stood up and stepped aside.

“Of course, Miss, yes, yes,” he said keenly, his soft spoken voice surprising me. He gestured to his warmed seat rather than the chair beside. I felt a bit fuzzy inside at this mannerly behaviour.

Close up his emerald green eyes had flecks of amber, like firelight dancing. He smelled of an expensive orange and bergamot scent that was not overpowering, unlike some of the other members who seemed to believe cologne was a substitute for bathing!

“Would you like a drink? I can fetch whatever you desire,” he asked eagerly.

“A brandy would be welcome, thank you.” The gentleman nodded, hurried next door into the dining room, and returned moments later with a glass of brandy. He passed it to me and took the seat beside. My companion turned to face me and his gaze nervously traced my eyes, mouth and then down to where my shawl had slipped off displaying my bare shoulders. His eyes travelled lower to my chest where my rosy nipples peeked out of the top of the bodice. His cheeks flamed, his Adams apple bobbed, and he licked his lips. I loved how the well-tended moustache framed his upper lip and I was sure it would feel deliciously ticklish against my mouth when we kissed. A bold thought, but I determined I would kiss this man, oh yes, I would have my way! It was clear as day that he liked what he saw. That made two of us!

“I know we’re not to give names, but you’re a performer, not a member, so may I ask?” he stuttered nervously and again, it surprised me how softly spoken he was. I smiled warmly,

“You may call me Miss Georgette, sir.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Miss Georgette. I’m...number 36,—” he stumbled, “—and you don’t have to call me sir.” I offered my hand for a shake and instead of formally shaking it he took my fingertips, turned my hand over, and boldly kissed my palm. His soft warm lips and the tickle of his moustache sent a dart of arousal straight to my nethers. I sipped the brandy, and when he darted a look up at me with those lovely green eyes, I pretended I didn’t feel that flash of lightning. He held onto my hand a little longer than necessary before saying an embarrassed, “Forgive me.”

We were silent for a long moment. He seemed nervous and yet I wanted to give him space to begin the conversation. Finally, he said, “It does seem terribly odd to have a number, not a name, but I suppose I’ll have to get used to it,” as if he was speaking to himself. We were both quite for a beat before I couldn’t take it no more.

“I must congratulate you on your win at cards, I was very impressed,” I offered. He directed kind, emerald green eyes at me.

“Thank you, Miss. I’ve never had such a big win at the table. I guess you must be my lucky charm.” He gave me a fleeting shy smile. I found his nervousness utterly charming.

Even though the law said fornication between men was punishable by prison or worse, it didn’t stop fellows like us from looking for companionship. When coves were sozzled at the theater bars and supper rooms, discretion was an afterthought. I’d had so many lecherous buggers groping and slathering over me, cornering me when I went to take a leak. Men who expected that, because I’d joined them for a drink, they

were due more than they were offered. I didn't like it one bit and I'd learned to be careful. Eloise would say I was too careful now, not having engaged in any tomfoolery with a fellow for quite some time. But Mr. 36 wasn't making me feel at all uncomfortable; in fact, his innocence was a breath of fresh air in this grubby city.

"I must say, you have an exceptional voice; such a range, and your pianist is wonderful. The musical entertainment was an unexpected treat. You should be on the stage, has anyone told you that before? I would happily pay to hear you sing."

I'd heard that line so many times, but from him it didn't seem cheesy. "You're very kind. Thank you. I am on the stage, but I'm not supposed to speak of my real life outside of Wychwood," I explained.

"Oh, forgive me, I didn't mean to pry," he countered apologetically.

"There's nothing to forgive."

36 sipped from his glass and then, gaining a little confidence he said, "I had no idea what to expect. I don't have much experience at this sort of thing...socializing openly with fellows who...know what I am...it's all rather intimidating. I was worried there would be an orgy in every room," he exclaimed with a self-conscious chuckle.

"There's no need to be nervous, sir." I placed my hand on his firm thigh and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "These gents are just the same as you. We all have our needs and there's surely a fellow here who would attend to yours," I placated.

His shoulders drooped, a little deflated. "You make it sound so easy," he said.

"If you tell Mr. Joshua what your particular pleasure is he can match you up with an agreeable partner." I'd hoped to reassure him; after all it was my job to ensure the gents had a good time. 36 remained quiet and thoughtful as he sipped his claret.

“I, um, don’t suppose I could be matched with you?” he said this so softly and hopefully that my heart clenched.

I met his longing gaze, “I’m sorry sir, rules is rules. You’ll have to find an assignation within the fifty-five, and that don’t include me. We can have a dance, but that’s it,” I said regretfully. And the regret wasn’t a word of a lie. I found this fellow so utterly delightful with his big green eyes, dopey mustachioed smile, and mop of unruly honey blond curls, and of course, he had a finely cut figure too.

“Ohhhh, songbird!” Alfonse called in a sing-song voice. “We have a request, mein lieblich .” he added affectionately. And it was not a moment too soon for I found I was getting lost in the gentleman’s eyes.

“Sorry sir, I have to get back to it.” I tossed the brandy down my throat, and then passed the glass to 36. I stood and curtsied to the gentleman.

“A dance...Miss, can we share a dance...after your song?” he said urgently as I strode off. I paused in the middle of the floor. And I swear my heart was already dancing. There was something about Mr. 36 that lit me up inside. I turned and nodded, then strode to join Mr. Hugo at the grand piano.

PERCY

I cannot recall ever feeling quite so tongue tied and nervous, which was ridiculous for a man of my age and status. But I remembered my manners and asked the songbird if she would join me for a drink. She agreed and so I rushed to pour a glass of brandy for her, desperately hoping that she would still be seated when I returned, and her attention had not been stolen away by another hopeful fellow. To my relief she'd waited for me and accepted the drink. I sat nervously with my body angled towards her. I couldn't stop staring at this comely vision. Close up, I was even more attracted, my gaze tracing the shape of those painted soft red lips, and lower to the sharp, angular boyish shoulders, firm masculine chest, and then the erect brown penny nipples that had me salivating. I looked up fixing on autumnal eyes with flecks of whisky, amber, and gold. Those eyes returned my interest. I had never been so sure in all my days that my attraction was mirrored. I wanted throw my misgivings aside and taste those pretty lips.

"I know we're not to give names, but you're not a member, so may I ask?" I ventured. She smiled warmly and in a cockney flavored accent said, "You, sir, may call me Miss Georgette."

Miss Georgette, goodness, how utterly delightful. Miss Georgette would be my new muse, and I'd write poems to rival the likes of Byron and Shelley and express how my heart longs for her touch.

"I'm... number 36," I said meekly. She offered her hand and surprising even myself, I turned her hand over, noting the long delicate fingers of a musician, and then I laid a kiss on her palm. I'd never done such a bold thing before, and if I'd tried this

audacious move on one of the fairer sex I would have been slapped across the face. But with Miss Georgette it felt right, and I was sure she groaned as my lips skimmed her skin, but when I looked up she was sipping brandy quite innocently. It was an unconvincing ruse to cover how flustered my action had made her. I watched the black lace choker around her throat bob as she gulped, and then realized I was still holding her fingers. I didn't want to let go.

"It does seem terribly odd to have a number, not a name—" Gods, I was rambling now. I looked away and took a swig of claret to cover my embarrassment. I knew I should be conversing with her. This is what people did in polite society. They began a back and forth game of comments and slivers of personal information. I knew this, and considered myself a learned conversationalist, but my brain was befuddled by Georgette's beauty, rendering me wide eyed and tongue tied. Miss Georgette stepped in to fill the awkward silence and congratulated me on my win at poker. In these few brief minutes in Miss Georgette's company I'd quite forgotten about the stack of money I'd won; such was her effect on me.

"Thank you, Miss. I guess you must be my lucky charm." Silence fell between us again and then I was sure my brain had turned to mush, for I could not think of a damn thing to say. She smelled of a floral scent mixed with masculine musk and I just wanted to look my fill, and sniff her, but then I thought myself an imbecile as it was a strange thing to do to someone I'd just met. I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable. Was I making her uncomfortable?

"The musical entertainment has been such an unexpected treat. I must say, you have an exceptional voice; such a range, and your pianist is wonderful. Has anyone told you, you should be on the stage?" I rambled out those ridiculous words and then I heard myself. I wanted the ground to open and swallow me. Of all the clichéd things to say, 'you should be on the stage' really takes the biscuit!

"You're very kind. Thank you. I am on the stage," she revealed, and oh, this rare

snippet of information intrigued me. I was a regular of theatres and music halls and I wondered if I had seen her perform before. I couldn't have, for I surely would have recognized her mercurial voice anywhere.

Not knowing why I was being so candid with a stranger, I explained of my discomfiture with socializing openly in the company of fellows who had the same preference. But Miss Georgette was thoughtful and kind in her response, and that put me at ease.

"There's no need to be nervous, sir. These gents are just the same as you." I'm sure she was correct, but out of the choice gents attending tonight not one had caught my eye. I was a desperate romantic. Maybe I was unrealistic or naïve, but I wanted a transformational love, the kind of soul connection the great poets wrote about, and not a tumble to slake my lust.

"You make it sound so easy," I said, feeling dejected. I'm sure it was easy when you found a fellow you liked who returned your interest. But that was not my experience before coming to Wychwood and I was worried that my lack of experience would show me to be a poor choice.

"If you tell Mr. Joshua what your particular pleasure is he can match you up with an agreeable partner," Miss Georgette explained.

That sounded so...transactional, and not at all what I was looking for. I watched her pretty painted mouth as she spoke, and then observed her eyes and thought Enough moping! Carpe Diem Percy, seize the day! I was confident she liked me too, so hopefully, I asked, "I don't suppose I could be matched with you?"

Miss Georgette appeared apologetic as she explained that there were rules, even here! "We can have a dance, but that's it."

I had not expected the refusal. Damn and blast, shot down on my first foray!

“We have a request, mein lieblich .” the pianist called. Miss Georgette stood, she hitched up her bodice and straightened her skirts and then pulled her shawl up to cover the lovely flesh of her shoulders. Then she apologized and walked away. No, this would not do. I wanted, needed more of her time.

“A dance...Miss, can we share a dance...after your song?” I cringed inside as I heard the desperation in my voice. I was a damnable fool to favour one of the few at Wychwood I was not permitted to tryst with! She paused, then turned and nodded shyly.

My heart took flight.

MISS GEORGETTE

“Come along my darlings, grab your beau and take him for a spin,” I encouraged as Mr. Hugo played another waltz. Three couples took to the floor. The first was an older black-skinned gentleman who wore a stunning lavender silk suit and his younger lover who was a radiant redhead in a lovely green gown. The second couple was both portly older gentlemen who only had eyes for each other, and the third couple was a scowling man with the look of the military about him. He danced with a stiff backed, dark-haired young lordling who looked like he did not want to be here at all.

My admirer watched me as I sat on the grand piano and sang. He was transfixed, wearing a dopey look on his face like I hung the moon and stars. It was ridiculously flattering to have his gaze on me and it made lusty heat coil at my nethers. I told myself he must have had too much to drink cos he’d only just met me and knew nothing about me. I’d dreamed of a man looking at me in that way, as if I was the most ravishing creature he’d ever seen. It quite went to my head, making my pego semi-hard in my silky knickers. I returned his longing looks. When I finished the song, the gents applauded so did a twirl on the piano, pulled up my skirts, and flashed my frilly drawers to whoops and wolf whistles. One of the regulars I knew as number 18 came over and caught me around the waist; and then lifted me to the ground. He took me for a jaunty whirl around the floor as Alfonse began to play another waltz. Members came into the room to watch. They stamped their feet and clapped in time as we all whirled around the dance floor, then suddenly; I was tugged from the arms of number 18 and into the arms of 36. I gasped and looked up into his green eyes, and my goodness, the fire of jealousy that burned there made me harden once more. We stood transfixed like time had stopped, me panting like I’d run a mile, the melody

moving on without me. Mr. 36 pressed us, chest to chest and grinned in triumph.

“Well, whatcha waiting for?” I goaded, and then we were off. Mr. Hugo played faster and I was dizzyed not only by the twirling waltz, but by my partner’s closeness and his hand in mine. I loved the feeling of his hard chest pressed against me, and the smell of him, the orange and bergamot perfume mingling with his personal scent was intoxicating. I wanted to drink him down like a soothing tea. It felt like we were stepping on air as he whirled me around the floor. This mysterious man could dance me to the stars and back and I’d still want more. When the waltz ended the gents applauded wildly, and even Mr. Hugo stood to applaud. Mr. Joshua had been watching us too. I picked up my skirts and curtsied while my dancing partner bowed. By this time, I was breathless and parched. I’d always had fun at Wychwood and danced with a swell or two who knew not to try anything that would lose them their prized place here, but I’d never been swept up in such a romantic way by a gentleman like 36. He’d gone from being as skittish as a rabbit, to confident enough to take me from the arms of another man. I wish I’d brought a fan because, my god, I was burning up and I desperately wanted to kiss Mr. 36. I hurried off to take a piss and check that I didn’t look like I’d been dragged through a hedge.

When I returned to the music room I didn’t see hide-nor-hair of Mr. 36. I went to join Mr. Hugo, and as it was late, we began on the slower, romantic ballads that put our gents in the mood. During my next break I took a turn of all of the downstairs rooms, yet I didn’t see Mr. 36. I wondered if he’d found a fellow to give him the relief he desired. The thought of it made me feel queasy. I had no right to feel that way. I didn’t know his name and he weren’t mine. He was here to get his end away in a safe space. And even though I knew all of these things were fact and truth, it still stung, cos this was the first time I’d met a fellow at Wychwood I wanted for myself. And I couldn’t have him.

PERCY

I was in quite the effervescent mood after the waltz and I couldn't recall ever having so much fun. The freedom of being able to dance with a man, even one dressed as a lady gave my heart joy. I headed to the drinks credenza to quench my thirst. Mr. Joshua was at my side as I poured for myself and Miss Georgette.

"Could I have a word, sir?" he said covertly to my ear.

"Of course, of course." I tossed back the claret before I followed the butler across the hall to a small study where he entered, stood aside, and then when I stepped in he closed the door. I felt like I'd been summoned to the headmaster's office! I then spied my winnings on the desk. Confusion fogged my brain. The money was supposed to be in the safe and I'd agreed to collect it before I left. Mr. Joshua didn't offer me a seat, or seat himself behind the desk. He stood in front of me with his hands behind his back in a military stance.

"Sir. As this is your first time at Wychwood I will let this infraction pass, but you only get one pass."

"I...I beg your pardon?" A sense of dread came over me.

"You have been informed of the house rules, yes? They were made for an important reason. They keep all who attend Wychwood safe. You are permitted to enjoy the company of other members of Club Fifty-Five; however, the performers are off-limits. Not only is there the issue of class, but there is also the matter of the power imbalance. Our performers are paid, and paid well for their service and silence."

My shoulders slumped and I let out a resigned sigh, “Ah.”

“A complaint was made,” he revealed. I wondered who could have done such a thing, and then I remembered how I’d stolen my prize from the arms of another. Oh dear, it seems I got quite carried away in the moment!

“It is clear that you’ve taken an instant liking to our Miss Georgette. She is an exceptional talent and the gentlemen adore her. But, in this instance the liking appears to be...mutual.” My heart leaped at his observation.

“However,” Joshua continued, “Georgette is not permitted to dally with members and this situation cannot be tolerated. There can be no favoritism. Therefore, I am interceding on her behalf. I know she values her place here as much as the house values her wonderful voice. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to endanger her position, sir.”

I’d felt such carefree joy dancing with Miss Georgette and I wanted to spend more time with her. But hearing Mr. Joshua’s words was like a bucket of iced water had been tossed into my face. I was a newcomer and it was clear that even though I’d been told the house rules I’d tripped up on my first outing. Mr. Joshua was right. I was behaving like a selfish oaf. I should not encourage Miss Georgette and endanger her employment here. I held my head in my hands. I was such a dolt, but, as a gentleman of manners I take responsibility for my faux-pas . I met Mr. Joshua’s regretful expression.

“Forgive me, sir. I do believe the freedom of the evening has quite gone to my head. I will of course take my leave. Can you arrange for a carriage to take me home?”

“A wise choice, sir, a very wise choice.” He stepped to the wall and tugged a bell pull. “A carriage should be with us shortly. If you’d be so kind as to remain here, I’ll come and fetch you.”

Mr. Joshua left the study and when the door closed I let out a roar of frustration.

“Damn your eyes, Harcourt!” I felt quite ashamed of my actions. My head was turned by someone I was not permitted to dally with here and I’d pushed my luck. Then I remembered that all was not lost, even if I could not spend the night with Miss Georgette, I’d had an excellent win at poker. I stepped to the desk to collect the pile of notes and stuffed them into my now bulging wallet.

Minutes later Mr. Joshua returned to the study holding my greatcoat, hat, scarf, and gloves. He helped me dress. I felt quite wretched to be thrown out like this. I wondered if this was it. Would I be allowed to return to Wychwood? Would I ever see the glorious Miss Georgette sing again? Joshua led me to the front door and opened it, but before I left, I said.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Joshua. Tonight has been quite the eye opener.”

“Now that you understand the lay of the land I look forward to seeing you return, sir.”

I nodded, and with nothing more to say I stepped up into the carriage.

The coachman opened a small hatch in the roof of his carriage. “Where to guvnor?” he asked.

“Head for Greenwich please,” I replied. As we rattled down the foggy drive, I settled my head back and absently smoothed my moustache as I listened to the rhythmic clip-clop of the horse’s hooves. When I closed my eyes all I could see was Miss Georgette, how her eyes sparkled and her smile lit me up inside. I was sure I would dream of dancing with her tonight, and it was with deep regret that I didn’t know if I’d ever see her again.

GEORGE

Someone was knocking on my room door. My head thudded, joining in with the annoying banging. I was hung-over worse than I could remember. I had no idea what time it was but I weren't getting out of bed for no one! I groaned and curled in on myself hoping whoever it was would bugger off and let me sleep. The knocking continued and Eloise shouted,

"George, I don't care if you're stark-bollock naked, if you don't open this door right now I'm coming in!" Eloise lived above a bookshop two streets away, and she liked to come in early and use the stage to rehearse new routines. I hitched one eye open and saw the pile of fabric discarded on the floor beside my bed. I'd not treated my dress or Eloise's bodice with the care they deserved. This fact was reinforced when the door to my room was flung open and in a banshee screech Eloise said,

"Bleedin' hell George! That's the last time I lend you anything." She stormed in and snatched the bodice from the floor. The sound of her yelling was too much for me. I turned over and grabbed a second pillow then sandwiched my head between them, curling my knees to my chest. My head was pounding so hard I wanted to die. I never usually drank so much at Wychwood, but last night wasn't a usual night at all.

My thoughts drifted to Mr. 36, and how, when he held me close, I'd felt like I was in some kind of fairytale. I knew that, after the dazzling waltz my life would never be the same again. And I was right, cos my hopes had been lifted on the wings of angels and then the angels dropped me from a great height when Mr. Joshua informed that 36 had left, alone, before midnight!

The pillow was unceremoniously torn from my head. Eloise sounded different, cautious, as she said, “Hey, whatever’s wrong Georgie?” I realized then that I was crying. I felt so overwhelmed with...feelings and I couldn’t stop them leaking out. I hadn’t let a fellow get under my skin for ages and in one evening 36 had got further than most. Why did I believe, even for a moment, that a swell like him would want to spend time with me? I knew it was against the house rules for us to dally, and for good reason too. All it takes is one thwarted lover with a grudge to make life very uncomfortable for men like us. The rules were in place to protect the gents who paid for a safe space to love and fuck. But, Gods, I was so lonely. I wanted to be loved and fucked too, and in my heart, I knew I would have risked my job for a tumble with 36, just for one night, so I knew what it felt like to be with a man like him.

Eloise clambered into bed behind me and gathered me back against her. She hugged me and was silent for a few minutes as I let the tears out and got to grips with myself. I’d known a mother’s love, but I wondered sometimes what it would have been like to have a dad. What would he have said when he discovered his boy was an invert? Would I be so comfortable with my preference if I had a father telling me to toughen up, be a man , stop crying , and don’t shame the family name ? I wallowed in self-pity. My head hurt, my throat was burning, and I was such a bloody fool. I knew better than to overindulge as my voice was my instrument and if I damaged it how was I supposed to make a living?

“Did something happen, George? Gods, you didn’t even take your greasepaint off when you got in. Your pillowcases are ruined. Come here, let’s get you cleaned up.”

Eloise backed out of the bed then came around to my side. I groaned in complaint as she pulled back the covers then gripped my hands. With more groans of protest; she pulled me up and out of the bed. I hadn’t put the gas stove on to heat the room when I got home and it was bloomin’ freezing. I was just wearing the pink frilly French knickers. I grabbed my Japanese silk robe, threaded my arms into it, and pulled the belt tight around my waist. Eloise led me to my dressing table and sat me down. The

dressing table was littered with all kinds of knick-knacks, costume jewelry, theater make-up, everything I used to create my character looks. I stared at my face in the mirror and yes, I looked like shit warmed over! My skin was patchy where white greasepaint remained, and the carmine red lipstick was smeared as if I'd drunkenly wiped my hand across my mouth, my eyes had dark rings of kohl, and my stubble had grown in overnight. What a mess!

"Drink this," Eloise ordered.

"What is it?"

"Gin. Hair of the dog!"

I hated Gin, and only kept a small bottle around as it was good for cleaning my mirrors, but I felt so unwell and down in the dumps that I guessed even a nip of Gin might be an improvement. It burned like the devil's piss going down and I grimaced. My room had a sink with hot and cold running water, and a gas stove where I could make tea or boil an egg for breakfast. Eloise moved to the sink, she ran the water and the pipes clanked and banged. She filled the kettle, lit the gas, and put the kettle on the stove. I stood on shaky legs and walked across the room, all stiff joints, like an automaton in need of a squirt of oil! I joined Eloise by the sink where she'd prepared a bowl of hot water, soap and a wash cloth.

"Scrub that shit off your face or you'll come out in spots. You know you're not supposed to leave it on overnight," she mother-henned. She was right of course. The greasepaint was so oily that it could lead to pimples, and no actor wants a face full of pimples.

"I'll go and get my big jar of cold cream from the dressing room to get the last of it, back in a tick!" She collected her bodice and left.

It was a rare luxury to have an indoor latrine, and Mr. Grayson had gotten several fitted in the theater, all paid for by a generous patron who ran a plumbing business. I went for a piss, then returned to my room and, using the basin of hot water, the cloth, and soap, scrubbed to remove the makeup.

I then sat at my dressing table and checked my skin again. I looked a little better, but my face was red and sore with all the scrubbing and I thought it best to let my stubble grow out for a day or two. The next time I was on stage was on Wednesday night. I figured I could play Captain Rimmer, as short stubble would look well for my soldier character, and if I added the fake curly moustache and a monocle it would also work for my randy aristocrat character Lord Dickey. But I'd have to talk as little as possible over the next day to protect my voice.

Eloise returned from our dressing room and barged into my room again. Her jar of cold cream was so big she had to use both hands to carry it. I gave her a querulous look.

"What? I buy it in bulk cos it's cheaper that way," she said sounding mildly offended as I cleared a space for her huge jar.

"Now, spill! What happened to take away your sparkle my love?" She started to spread the cold cream on my face like she was buttering bread. My shoulders slumped and my vow to not speak to protect my voice went straight out the window.

"Long story short." My throat still burned and my voice sounded hoarse. I coughed and continued. "I met someone. We got on like we were made for each other, we danced, and then he was gone. Poof!" I mimed sadly.

"And?" Eloise asked eagerly.

"I don't know his name...he don't know my name...and I don't know if I'll ever see

him again,” I said with grim poetry.

“That’s a lot of don’t knows there, George.” Eloise’s reflection was smiling affectionately at me in my dressing table mirror. “Sounds like quite a fairytale night, Cinders!” Her eyes were full of mischief. “So, you fell in love at first sight?”

“No! Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t know him, and he don’t know me. We were in the same place for a few hours and I liked the look of him, that’s all. That ain’t love.”

“What does he look like?”

“A fine figure, and he was so handsome in his tail coat,” I replied dreamily. “He’s got curly blond hair and he didn’t use pomade or anything to flatten it, just let his mop remain natural. And his eyes, oh his eyes were green and had flecks like fire, and his mustachioed smile lit up his whole face,” I said in a dramatic rush. “When he first arrived, he was so nervous, and then later on we talked and he was kind and charming. He said he liked my voice, and when I sang, he looked at me like I hung the moon, and he...said he wanted to...take me to bed.”

Eloise gasped, “He didn’t!”

“He did! I told him it wasn’t allowed...I’m not allowed to get off with house clients. I love that job, but if I’m honest...I would have risked it.”

Our eyes met in the mirror and we both erupted in peals of laughter. Eloise hugged me from behind.

“So what happened...I need details?”

“My pianist was playing a set of waltzes. One fellow took me out for a dance, and this gent just stepped in and pulled me from the other fellow’s arms.”

“He didn’t!” Eloise was scandalized.

“It’s true. He was so masterful and romantic and then we waltzed together. It was like I was dancing on the clouds, Lou. I swear, I ain’t never had so much fun in my life.”

“And?”

“And, then, the waltz was over, and he vanished. My boss told me the gentleman left!”

I opened my dressing table drawer and picked out one of the rags I kept especially for removing cold cream. I set to scraping the cream off my face while Eloise brushed my hair. We were silent for a while before Eloise asked, “So, I don’t suppose he gave you any clues to who he is?”

I thought back to the brief time we’d shared, and no, I couldn’t recall anything he’d said that would give me a clue to his identity. He was good at cards, he loved music, and he was a wonderful dancer, but so were lots of men. “Nothing,” I sighed. “But you’ll be pleased to hear that even though I got shitfaced after, I did remember to bring back leftovers from the buffet like I said I would. They’re in the pantry.” Eloise’s reflection was comical, “All’s not lost then!” She tossed the hairbrush to the dressing table and rushed to my pantry where I’d put the cloth napkins filled with leftover pastries and confectionary.

The kettle was whistling on the stove, and so my best friend and I breakfasted like aristocrats, on chocolate truffles, spiced apple pastry, pineapple, and black tea.

PERCY

I awoke from a glorious dream of twirling, twirling, twirling, with an orchestral accompaniment and a glorious boy in my arms. I liked this feeling very much and I wanted to stay here with my beau and follow the feelings of arousal in my groin. But, with the sharp repetitive knocking on my room door, the day had other ideas. I was glad the head butler respected my wishes that he should not enter my room without permission.

“Good morning, Bentley. What do you want?” I called resignedly, my throat a little hoarse.

“Your mother wishes to know if you’ll be joining her for church this morning.”

Gods, I’d forgotten that I was expected to escort mother to the Sunday morning service. Since my grandfather died, she had worn black and become ever more devout in her beliefs. She’d expected me to follow suit. I did not agree with going to church every morning, nor did I believe that grandfather Theo would have wanted me to mourn him so obsessively. I knew for a fact he wanted me to live my life as I saw fit and love whoever I wanted to love. Father now had the responsibility of Harcourt Press, and he worked all hours, and so mother was left with her ladies’ maid, Miss Grieves for daily companionship. I wish she’d have had a daughter to carry out these kinds of mind-numbing family duties, because all I wanted to do was write and find other enjoyable pursuits to fill my days away from the office.

At Wychwood, the muse had come to me like a lightning strike and even though I’d left under a cloud, when I got home in the early hours all I could think to do was

write, write, write. I didn't know if anything I'd written was any good, for I was inebriated and full of the fever of unfulfilled desire. But Miss Georgette made lyrical words pour from me like ambrosia of the Gods.

I didn't move a muscle, but hollered my response towards the closed door. "I have stomach flu and will stay in bed today. Send mother my apologies and tell her to go with Miss Grieves."

"Very good sir. Please let me know if you require any assistance," the butler called back.

"Actually, Bentley, after mother's left for church could you send up a tray of breakfast? I'm rather famished and in the mood for a good hearty meal."

"Of course, sir," he said sardonically.

As the only son of the owner of Harcourt Press, after finishing university, I'd had my pick of which publication I worked on. I chose The Archaeological Journal because the subject of archaeology had always fascinated me. I edited articles sent in by academics and archeologists, and I advised on the contents of each issue of the periodical. The work was enjoyable and it kept me on my toes. I liked to be among the first to be informed about new archaeological discoveries. The job was generally solitary, so it also allowed me moments to pen lines of poetry that came to me during the day. I must confess, in the two weeks since I'd spent the evening at Wychwood with Miss Georgette inspiration had taken flight. I'd poured out my heart onto the pages of a newly purchased notebook which I'd devoted to my thoughts and feelings from that evening. I would love to see Miss Georgette again, and yet, part of me thought that maybe our meeting was one of those perfect moments in time when souls collide in recognition and then go their separate ways. Could I have been drawn to the

idea of her, rather than the reality? I wondered if, instead of feeling lovelorn and wistful I should take the brief meeting as a gift from the muses to lift my poetry to a higher plane.

A knock on my office door made me look up from the page I was correcting. “Yes,” I said as a timid man by the name of Oliver Simmons stepped in. The legal department was made up of an odd bunch of fellows and I recognized him as one of the lawyers. The legal department rarely interacted with other employees unless an error had been discovered in print, and there were legal ramifications. And so, I was surprised to see Simmons in my office at all.

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Harcourt, sir,” he said in a simpering tone.

“Ah, Mr. Simmons, what can I do for you?”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Jonty Edwards is getting married this Sunday, and so we’re going to take him out tonight for a bachelors celebration.”

I vaguely recalled that Jonty Edwards was the head clerk in the legal department. I don’t think we’d shared more than two words in my three years here.

“Oh, no, I hadn’t heard. Please send him my congratulations.”

“Um...Well, we were wondering if you’d like to join us...for the celebrations, sir. We’re planning a drink at the Dog and Duck next door, and then we’ll go onto a music hall in town for supper and a show.”

I was rather surprised by the invitation. During my three years as editor of the Archaeological Journal, the fellows in the legal department had never invited me to socialize with them. I did socialize with the staff journalists and illustrators, a couple of whom I considered good friends.

“How many staff are going?” I enquired.

“Not quite sure, I’ve had a lot of maybes, but I guess we’ll see the numbers at the Dog and Duck after work and go from there.”

Ah, now I understood the reason for the invitation. This poor man was worried that no one would show up for his friend’s bachelor party because the lawyers were not the sociable type. He was desperate to have someone as influential as me to join the party so that it would encourage others to come along. What could I say? I couldn’t allow this Jonty Edwards to have a disappointing last outing before marriage. Oh no, I would do what I could to ensure there was a suitable number of colleagues to wish him well.

“I’d be delighted to attend,” I said heartily. “And I’ll send a note down to Alf at the Dog and Duck to say that drinks for Edward’s party will be paid for by Harcourt’s.”

“Oh, oh that’s so very kind of you, sir. We’ll be heading down after five. It’s going to be a smashing night I’m sure,” he beamed.

Oliver Simmons left my office with a spring in his step, and before I forgot and lost myself in the article I was editing, I wrote three notes. One to Alf explaining that I would cover the cost of drinks for Edward’s bachelor’s party, another to the Henry Latimer in the art department, and the third to the Oscar Rhodes a journalist who worked one floor down. These two men were dear friends and never said no to a night of frivolity, and so what better excuse. They were well connected and would also ensure that word of free drinks at the Dog and Duck would get around! I pressed the bell and my secretary came in to take the notes and send them on their way with a runner. Now with only five hours of the work day remaining, I decided I’d leave early and change before stepping out for the evening.

The Dog and Duck in Wapping was a rowdy affair, with patrons coming from the print works, and offices as well as sailors and laborer's working at the docks. With it being a Friday and payday for many, the pub was packed with sweaty bodies of working men, but for Harcourt's men, the drinks were on me! My influence had garnered a group of around fifteen for this impromptu bachelor's party, and it pleased me to see Jonty Edwards beaming with pride that so many had turned up.

As expected, my friends Henry and Oscar took advantage of the free bar. Both of them worked on the Archaeological Journal. Henry illustrated new finds, ruins, and landscapes while Oscar interviewed academics and archeologists at digs to get up-to-date information on investigative research that would then be published in the journal.

Oscar puffed on his pipe between sips of cider.

"How are things shaping up with this month's edition?" he asked.

"It's rather slow this month. I'm still awaiting Forbes, and Jessop to send in their essays. They're both two weeks past their deadlines."

"Bloody amateurs," Oscar barked derisively. "If you're caught between a rock and a hard place, I'm currently working on the account of my visit to the Ethnological Society and their talk about the discoveries in the Roman ruins of Wroxeter. It's quite fascinating." He paused to puff on his pipe. "They recovered skulls that they believe, by the shape of the crania, pre-date the Romans and Celts who once lived on the land. I have the bones of the article...pun intended," he snickered, "and if you'd like to bring the publication date for it forward to this month's journal, I can finish it next week."

"I've given Forbes and Jessop until Monday to submit their work and if they miss that deadline then I'll consider the alternatives. An ethnological essay would fit

nicely,” I mused.

Henry spoke up then. “Ah yes, I attended that dig in Wroxeter for a couple of days. If memory serves I have several illustrations of the skulls in situ that will be suitable to accompany the piece.”

I nodded in consideration. “Now, enough about work, we’re here to celebrate Edwards final nights of freedom.” I stood up, “A toast!” I declared, and there were murmurs of agreement from tables of Harcourt staff. It was then I realized I had no idea of Edwards’ fiancé’s name. Simmons and Edwards were sitting at another table with a group of mole-like bespectacled law colleagues.

“I say, Oliver,” I called. The timid fellow turned then leaned closer to my table. I whispered into his ear, “I don’t suppose you know the name of Edwards intended?”

“It’s Mabel, sir. Mabel Atkins.”

I stood then, “A toast, gentlemen, to our Jonty Edwards, who marries the beautiful Mabel Atkins on Sunday. All at Harcourt Press wish you the greatest of happiness. To the happy couple!” I raised my glass.

“The happy couple!” our party parroted; their pints of beer held aloft. Edwards looked rather embarrassed by the attention, which was the whole point of a boy’s night out before marriage! We remained at the Dog and Duck for one more round and then Simmons organized three carriages to take us into Covent Garden.

The Middlesex Music Hall on Drury Lane was a popular theater attended by all classes. There was a bar, and supper was on offer for sixpence each. We arrived early enough to get two of the large round tables on the ground floor with a decent view of

the stage for our party. The chamber orchestra of eight musicians began to play and the music elevated my mood. The show was due to begin at 8 p.m. It was now 7:30 p.m. so I purchased a playbill from one of the serving girls to see who would be appearing tonight. There were comedians, singers, a troupe of Can-Can dancers from Paris, a contortionist, a juggler, and a magician.

My friends Henry Latimer and Oscar Rhodes sat either side of me while our other colleagues formed their own cliques of workmates. The beer flowed and platters of bread, meats, and cheeses were delivered for both tables and both of my chums were in high spirits.

“I say old boy,” Rhodes said puffing on his pipe. “I’m rather intrigued by the fact you’ve invited us to socialize with law clerks as we’ve never done so before.”

“Yes, what gives? Does a Harcourt actually have a heart?” Latimer agreed.

“Ha ha,” I mocked. I gripped my beer flagon and took a gulp, and then I spoke for the ears of my friends only. “You know full-well that the legal fellows keep themselves to themselves. In all honesty, I’d felt sorry for the fellow as there weren’t many takers at first. It was my duty to ensure Edwards had a good night.”

What I didn’t say was that I’d also needed a night out too. I feared I was losing myself to obsession. In the two weeks since meeting Miss Georgette the muse came to me at the most inopportune times. I kept a notebook in my pocket filled with poems of love and longing. I’d never felt so inspired in my whole life. But in following the muse I’d also become rather detached from my social circle. The friends with whom I would usually attend recitals each week were unhappy with me for begging off. I didn’t know how long the muse would be with me, and so I’d sought to take full advantage. Mother believed me to be a busy man about town, following my same social routines, and yet I’d secretly remained out of the house and my club because I’d gone to Regents Park, or to the British library, or to a tea room

where I could sit in peace with my vision of Miss Georgette and write to her.

The first three performers were a comedian, a juggler, and magician who were entertaining enough. By the fourth act the crowd was well and truly warmed up. I was feeling relaxed, surrounded by music, colour and good friends with a flagon of beer at hand. The oily proprietor a Mr. Alfred Grayson stepped on stage to introduce the next act.

“Now my lovelies, are you ‘avin’ a good time?” he called, his booming voice quieting the rabble. The patrons roared back a resounding ‘Yes’.

“We’ll I’m glad to hear it, cos have we got a treat for you!” The crowd roared. “Our next act is one of our brave boys who’s just come back from the war. So please give a warm round of applause for...Captain Rimmer!”

The orchestra struck up a military tune as a soldier in full uniform marched on to the stage. The crowd applauded and whooped, as if they were familiar with this act. The soldier had a short brown beard and wore a dashing red tailcoat uniform with a white sword sash and a high neck collar. Shiny brass buttons glinted in the limelight, and gold fringed epaulettes swayed as he marched. His blue pillbox hat had a white pom-pom, and his navy trousers bore a military red stripe. He marched around the stage as if it was the parade ground, and he made for a striking sight with his, between you and I, rather lovely arse. Things were looking up! I clapped and hollered along with the boisterous audience.

The music stopped and Captain Rimmer stood to attention in the center of the stage where he saluted. He spoke in a cultured resonant voice and told a fanciful and, honestly, quite filthy story of his experiences as a soldier, which had the patrons howling. Then he told a tale of his old Brigadier father and the advice he gave to him

on joining up. Captain Rimmer then launched into a song. It began as a sober story of an elderly Brigadier on his deathbed, the subject drawing the punters in, and when he sang the chorus, like the rest of the crowd, I teared up with laughter, because the innuendos in the lyrics were oh so clever.

My curiosity piqued, I stood up. My colleagues were far too engaged with the performance to notice me leaving. I strode through the smoky low-lit auditorium and down a side aisle to get a closer look at this Captain Rimmer. He had a fine figure and he mimed lewd gestures with his song that seemed familiar, as did the voice, which was rich and resonated in the auditorium, accompanied by the orchestra. The audience seemed to adore him and they sang along each time he reached the chorus.

Always look after your Privates

And your Privates will look out for you.

Each man starts at the bottom,

And though that is rotten,

Keep going and we'll pull you through!

Don't get sad, don't get bitter,

Though war is the shitter,

And fightin's what you're paid to do.

So, always look after your Privates,

And your Privates will look out for you!

A serving girl was swaying along with the song. I stood beside her and leaned in.

“Forgive the intrusion Miss, but who is he?”

“Oh, that’s our George, wonderful isn’t he,” she sighed.

“George?”

“George Dancie. He’s a regular; does all kinds of characters. The punters love ‘im.”

I looked at Captain Rimmer anew and my heart leaped. He was...marvelous, holding the audience in the palm of his hand, playing them as a conductor with his orchestra. My heart thudded in recognition. I had become so fixated on Miss Georgette, in her pretty dress, bodice, and blond ringlets that I hadn’t imagined what else she—HE could be. But now I understood she was one of many characters of an actor by the name of George Dancie. I knew that George’s secret preference was the same as mine and we’d shared a moment at Wychwood. I wanted to know if he’d felt the same attraction as I did, or if that moment was all we would share.

“I say, is there any way to get a note to Mr. Dancie?” I asked the girl.

“There’s always a way, sir, for a price.”

“Of course,” I removed the notebook and a pencil from my inner breast pocket. I found a page where a few lines of poetry were jotted, and I hurriedly added a note, then carefully tore the page out, folded it, passed it to the serving girl.

“I’m sitting at that table over there,” I said directing to the table of my work colleagues, who were singing the catchy chorus once more.

“Give him this and wait for a reply.” I then showed her a silver sixpence coin, which

is probably more than she was earning from waiting tables tonight. “You’ll get this when you come back with the reply.” The girl nodded eagerly and when George had finished his song to riotous applause she moved off, vanishing through a staff only door that I supposed went back stage.

I returned to my seat, where my friends and colleagues raved about the wonderful, entertaining Captain Rimmer.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:00 pm

GEORGE

“It’s a good crowd tonight, boss,” I called to Mr. Grayson as I ran off stage followed by roaring applause. Audiences loved a filthy sing-song, especially on a Friday night as many had just got paid and coves were here to drink and laugh their cares away. Mr. Grayson slapped me on the back,

“You had them eating out of your hand, lad. That song’s a cracker!” he praised “Remember, you’re closing the show tonight so you’ll be back on in an hour. Are we seeing Lord Dickey, Sister John Thomas, or Dixie Normus?” he asked.

“Dixie,” I replied before we were distracted by the troupe of Can-Can dancers who were on next. The ladies wore dazzling gowns and huge feather plumed head dresses

“Mesdames, prenez vos places, s’il vous pla?t,” Grayson said in cockney accented French that made me cringe a little. The orchestra began the introduction for the ‘Gallop Infernal’ by Jacques Offenbach , known to everyone as the ‘Can-Can music’. At hearing the opening bars, the roar from the crowd was deafening. I was sure the punters would soon be on their feet dancing too. But I was sweaty and parched and so I didn’t stick around to watch. I eased my way through the crowd of performers and stage hands that always came to watch the Can-Can from the wings. I headed down a corridor to the dressing room I shared with Eloise. She was on after the Can-Can girls and had a few more minutes to wait, as they’d always give an encore.

I did our special knock before I opened the door. Eloise’s caramel skin was oiled, and her peroxide blonde hair was smoothed down with pomade, a kiss curl on her brow. She wore her costume of a blue sequin encrusted bra top and shorts with matching

soft soled slippers, the costume not leaving much to the imagination! She was walking on her hands, her legs folded backwards and her feet resting on her shoulders. She had a Sweet Threes cigarette sticking out of the corner of her mouth. Balancing on one hand, she removed the cigarette and exhaled a sweet-smelling cloud before asking.

“What’s the crowd like tonight?” She put the cigarette back between her lips and continued to hand walk up and down the specially cleared area beside the chaise longue.

“Well in their cups, it’s a good crowd. Captain Rimmer went down a storm,” I said as I quickly removed the white sword sash and red dress jacket of the smart uniform. The first thing I always did when I got off stage was to get out of my costume as quickly as possible because I sweated something awful on stage. If I wanted to get a good long life out of my costumes they needed to remain as clean as possible. I loved Captain Rimmer’s costume. I’d purchased an old uniform from the 53rd Regiment of Foot in an Army surplus store just off Carnaby Street. It was an attractive look, with a red tailcoat with shiny brass buttons and gold fringed epaulettes. The tailcoat jacket had a high-necked collar that made me stand straight backed, and put me into the character. And it made me look devilishly handsome too if I do say so myself!

Unbeknown to those outside the theater circle, theaters ain’t all the glamour and sparkle that punters see on stage. Backstage stinks of feet and armpits, and it was worse before we got proper plumbing and latrines fitted! And don’t get me started on the stench of a costume store room. Costumes can’t be washed every night and so my ma taught me the nifty trick of putting a wool filled pad under each armpit when the costume is on so that I’d sweat into them. They could be removed and washed, instead of stinking out my whole costume.

I removed the sweat pads from under my armpits and tossed them in a laundry basket. There was a sharp knock on the door, and the stage manager Arthur Formby poked

his head in,

“Two minutes, Lou,” he said before closing the door. Eloise unfolded herself and stood with her hands clasped above her head, stretching her spine. She stubbed out the cigarette in an ashtray, put on her head dress, and pinned it securely. I gave her a peck on the cheek as she left, but no sooner was she out the door Doris, one of the serving girls knocked and looked in.

“I’ve got a note for you, George,” she said in a secretive and salacious manner. A folded slip of paper was held between two fingers of the hand she wiggled at me. “He told me to wait for a reply.”

I got on with most of the serving girls, but some of them...like Doris, got airs. They wanted to be seen on the arm of an actor, or even to socialize with actors, or the theater proprietor! Doris was known for being a lazy bones, watching the show more than she served at tables. I don’t know why Grayson didn’t get rid of her...well, actually, I could think of a reason! I’d learned to be discrete in my dealings around Doris cos I didn’t trust her not to gossip. I rose from my seat at the dressing table and plucked the note from her fingers. Then I closed the door in her face.

She knocked again.

“Oi! The gent said to wait for a reply,” she repeated urgently to the closed door.

“I heard you the first time, hang on!” I called haughtily.

I occasionally got invitations to go for a drink with a gentleman, or to join a group of stagehands or showgirls at one of the pubs in the theater district. I unfolded the note. The words on the scrap of paper were written in pencil, a scribble really, but they had the power to stop my heart and then set it going again at a gallop.

I danced with an angel

As if in a dream

I saw heaven in their eyes,

Desire on the tip of my tongue.

Meet me?

36

I swooned onto the chaise pressing the note to my chest written in his hand. My heart was beating ever so fast.

“You got a reply George? George?” Doris kept knocking on the door and while lost in my thoughts I’d quite forgotten she was waiting outside.

I took a breath and steadied myself before opening the door. In a nonchalant tone I replied, “Tell the gentleman, yes. He should meet me at the stage door after the show. But before you run off, show me where he’s sitting, I want to get a look at him.”

I followed Doris out of the dressing room and back down the hallway towards the stage. We stood in the wings stage left, as Eloise mesmerized the audience with her erotic contortions. Doris pointed out my admirers table. 36 sat with a group of men. They appeared to be middle class, clerks, or some such, not the bunch of toffs I imagined he socialized with. This made me curious. Who was he? If he wasn’t a toff how did he get his invite to Wychwood?

“Never seen him before,” I said dismissively. “Cheers Doris.”

The serving girl moved off and I watched as she walked down the stairs and exited through the door that led onto the auditorium. Her ample hips swayed, as she edged among the tables, batting away the occasional hand trying to kop a feel until she reached the table where 36 sat. Then she bent down, her plentiful bosom nearly falling out of her top and she spoke into the ear of my admirer. The bright limelight on stage gave off a glare and so I couldn't make out his expression at getting a positive reply. But I did see the glint of the coin he passed to her.

Brimming with excitement that I couldn't share with anyone except Eloise, I rushed back to my dressing room. I shut myself in and locked the door. My head was swimming like I was drunk. I need to shave for my next act. Dixie was a cowgirl character who sang about her cowboy shooting blanks. I shrugged my braces off my shoulders and pulled off my white vest, then stepped out of the regimental navy trousers, folded them and put them on the hanger with the rest of Captain Rimmer's costume. I stepped into a pair of long-Johns and cowboy boots.

Eloise knocked just after I'd soaped up my jaw. I put the soap brush down and unlocked the door.

"Don't you look a sight for sore eyes," she laughed at my get-up.

"How'd it go?"

"They was throwing money on stage again tonight, some buggers hit me with a sovereign!" Her head dress was off and the cap was filled with coins.

"Payday for the boys is pay day for the girl!" I chuckled. Then I went back to the sink, picked up my cut throat razor, and taking a breath to calm my excitement, I slowly drew it up my cheek, against the grain to get a good close shave. I had to concentrate and do this right, so I didn't say anything to Eloise and she knew not to talk to me when I was shaving. I saw in the mirror how she poured the contents of her

cap onto the chaise and began to count the coins. I made swift work of shaving, and then rubbed the remaining soap off my face with a towel.

“How much is it then?” I asked, turning to face her.

“Two pounds, three shillings and sixpence.”

“Bloody ‘ell girl! You’ll be dining out with all the la-de-dahs on that!” I joked.

“Oh no. I ain’t spending this! I’m going to America as soon as I’ve saved enough.” Eloise had been talking about going to America for the five years I’d known her. And as far as I knew she’d never even looked up the cost of passage on a ship to New York! I suppose it was nice to dream.

“So, why are you grinning like the cat that got the cream?” Eloise asked.

I grabbed the folded note from the dressing table and sat beside her on the chaise.

“He’s here,” I said, trying to control the bubble of excitement in my chest.

“Who’s here?”

“The gentleman...the one I waltzed with!”

“Oh... OHHH. How did he find you?”

“I dunno, Doris was asked to give this note to me. She pointed him out in the auditorium. It’s definitely him.”

“Well, what does it say?” Eloise sounded as excited as I was. I gave her the note, she read it and her eyes grew wide.

“Oh, my heart! This is the most romantic thing I’ve ever read.” I snatched it back and supposed I would prize it forever.

“Isn’t it.”

“So, are you gonna meet him?”

“Is rain wet? Course I am. But Dixie’s closing the show. I’ve got to get ready.” I looked up to the clock on the wall. “I’m back on in twenty minutes. Help me into my dress, will ya?”

PERCY

I watched the final act, the outrageously named Dixie Normus. The name alone had the fellows at my table crying into their beer with laughter. I wondered where George got his character names from. This female character wore cowboy boots, a knee length blue and white gingham dress with petticoats, a leather waistcoat, and a low-slung belt with two guns, which of course were stage props. Beneath a pale Stetson hat was a wig of red ringlets. She sang in an exaggerated American drawl. The song was a ballad about a lonely cowgirl who met a cowboy on the plains, and discovered he was unable to get her in the family way. It was the kind of bawdy song that this drunken crowd loved.

I considered for a moment how my mother and her friends would react to the vulgar lyrics if they were here. I supposed fainting and pearl clutching would ensue. The thought of it made me smile. The daring, unconventional nature of George's act tickled me. I found I enjoyed the risqué double entendres, and the universal subject matters of love, relationships, loss, and longing. The songs I'd heard George sing in his many guises appealed to the common man as well as the upper classes. I too ended up singing along to the chorus of Dixie's wistful saucy song.

When my cowboy's gun ain't firin''

Maybe I should try ridin' you!

Dixie pointed out men in the audience as she sang the last line in the chorus, which led to much tomfoolery, and wolf whistling. George closed the show to a standing ovation and I clapped until my hands hurt. My innards twisted with excitement and

anxiety that soon enough I would be able to converse with the real George Dancie and hopefully get to know him as he is, and not as one of his characters.

Following the crowd of patrons, our band of very merry Harcourt's men piled out onto Drury Lane. It had rained when the show was on but blessedly, the downpour was now over. Standing outside the Middlesex Music Hall with the men from Harcourt's Press, I felt proud of our camaraderie and that the fellows in our party had enjoyed the night. I slapped Edwards on the back, and wished him a happy wedding day. The smiling clerk appeared so inebriated and contented he could barely stand, so I was glad when his friend Oliver Simmons said he would take him home. Our other colleagues began to disperse, and my friend Henry asked me to join him and Oscar on a jaunt to a gaming club in Chinatown that we'd visited a time or two. But, tonight I had to beg off, for I had other plans!

After my friends hailed hansoms and we said our farewells I strode to the side alley of the theater and down to the stage door. The rain-soaked pavements glistened, reflecting the shimmer of gaslights from windows above. I was feeling a little queasy, what with the scents of dampness, decay, and piss in the alley, along with the curl of excitement and anxiety about the impending meeting. But despite the vile stench, the alley to the stage door was packed with people. A crowd was assembled around the door waiting to get their playbill signed as the performers left. I did notice several rough looking fellows who I was sure were up to no good; other patrons were vying for the attention of the showgirls when they stepped out. One girl was leaning against the wall with a fellow in a sailor uniform pressed to her. I pulled my greatcoat tight in the chill of the night and waited in a shadowed alcove for George to come out.

Twenty minutes later the crowds around the stage door had thinned as revelers went off arm-in-arm to find a pub, or a private place. I wished I'd brought a hat to fend off the cold. The remaining gents skulked away following the contortionist girl, Miss Eloise Fields, like a pack of hounds. She was an exotic pretty young thing and it made me smile that she ignored the catcalls of the men as she walked arm linked with

another girl. The two women paused in front of me, and Miss Eloise gave me an up and down look and then winked before she left with her admirers in tow. An older, burly man in a flat cap and a heavy coat exited through the stage door and locked it up behind himself. He gave me a piteous look as he passed by but said nothing. Finally, it was just me in a cold, dark alley, biting my lip, feeling like a ninny, and wondering whether George had changed his mind and left through the front-of-house to avoid me. After the jollity of the evening, that thought made me feel a little crestfallen.

“Psst!” I turned in the direction of the sound and saw a side gate was open and in the shadowed darkness a fellow was standing. It was George. My mood brightened immediately. He beckoned me to him and I hurried through the gate, which he latched behind me. The theaters in the area all emptied onto Drury Lane, and the nightlife remained raucous in the Covent Garden district with men singing, shouting and brawling and women cackling with laughter followed by the jarring smash of breaking glass and the alarmed barking of dogs. The cacophony was a distraction until George took my hand and led me past the stinking discarded scenery, props, and detritus at the rear of the theater. The buildings along Drury Lane were packed in like sardines and gaslight illuminated the upper windows of the dwellings around us. I had no idea where George was taking me, but at that moment with his hand in mine, I was so very in awe of him and I didn’t care. He paused at the bottom of an iron fire escape and looked back at me. In the low light I saw the ghost of a smile. Together we hurried up the staircase, our clanging footfalls echoing. When we reached the top George opened a heavy door and we stepped into a dimly lit corridor, George let go of my hand and locked the door behind us.

“Everyone’s gone home. It’s only you and me, is that okay?” he said in a low husky voice.

His words thrilled me. “Yes, y...yes, that’s okay.” Then George led me along a tenebrous hallway that smelled musty and sweaty. I couldn’t make out the details of

the framed posters and playbills on the walls. As George came upon a wall lamp, he turned the gas off and the flame spluttered out plunging us into pure darkness. My breath hitched with fear as I wasn't too fond of the dark, but within a few steps George opened a door and I followed him into a large low-lit room. George turned to face me then and our gazes collided for the first time, as we are, men with no secret setting or character between us. It was then that I got a good look at him, without costumes, wigs, or greasepaint to change his features. He had waves of mousy brown hair in a side parting, close cropped at the sides and long on top. His eyes were warm autumnal brown, like watered down whisky, and his features, handsome and pretty at the same time. He was mercurial; a creature of beauty and graceful movement as he locked the door and turned away, stepping further into the room. It was then I noticed my surroundings. This was one large room and drapes divided the space into bedroom, sitting room, and cooking area. The walls were plastered with playbills and posters for not only the Middlesex, but for other theaters in the district too. An upright piano sat against one wall with a window that at a guess overlooked the back alley. There was a makeshift kitchen area against the opposite wall comprising of a one plate cast iron gas stove unit that also heated the room. There was a sink, a pantry cupboard, pots and pans on wall hooks, and a worn pine table with two chairs. Off center, a three-seater couch was draped with colourful fabrics, matched with a battered steamer trunk that George used as a table. Behind the crimson velvet curtain, I guessed there was a bed. I hoped to find out if I was right.

The room was warm, stiflingly so. Maybe the intense heat I felt was just me? I removed my white kidskin gloves and stuffed them into my coat pocket. The air smelled of greasepaint, fragrant oil and the sweat of him, I guess, because it appeared George Dancie live here alone.

George turned back to look at me again with those huge warm autumnal eyes. He bit his plump lower lip, "What's your name?" his voice was merely a whisper.

"Percy...Percy Harcourt, it's a pleasure to finally meet the real you, George Dancie,"

I grinned and his responding smile outshone the sun.

“I suppose Doris told you my name. Thank you for the note. It was uh...well received.” His true voice, if this was his true voice, was mellifluous, smooth, and musical. He tried to cover a cockney accent with precise articulation. The saucy grin that accompanied his comment made me forget my words. All I could think to say was, “Good,” as I offered my hand to be shaken. I was shocked and delighted when George stepped closer, took my hand, turned it over, and while he gazed up to meet my eyes he kissed my palm, mirroring what I had done at to Miss Georgette at Wychwood. My groin ached with desire.

“Well met, Mr. Percy Harcourt. Welcome to my boudoir. It ain’t much, but its home,” he gestured with a theatrical swipe of his arm.

“It’s, um, very cozy,” I said, still finding it difficult to string words together.

“Would you care for a drink Percy Harcourt?”

Oh, I think I could grow to love my name on his lips.

“Yes, yes, indeed I would.”

GEORGE

Well, blow me! My heart was beating ten-to-the-dozen. I was in my room with the man of my dreams. I stared distractedly at Percy as he stared back at me and then we both looked away, our burning mutual attraction undeniable. Those huge sea green eyes, the blond moustache, and the unruly mop of unconquered honeyed curls attracted me now even more than when I'd met him in the grand surroundings of Wychwood. But his smile, my word! I mirrored him with a bashful grin then looked away. When I glanced up again his eyes were trained on his fine boots. We were an awkward pair!

"Drinks, right," I rubbed my hands together to stop myself from reaching out and running my fingers through his lovely curls. "Let me see what I've got in, take off your coat if you're stopping, and have a seat." I gestured to the couch then strode across the room, nervous as all hell to have a gentleman in my home. I hoped that he didn't think less of me after seeing my situation.

"I can put the kettle on if you want tea or cocoa," I relayed. There was no reply from Percy so I turned to see he was in the same spot with his great coat and scarf still on. Was I being presumptuous? Maybe he'd just wanted to assure himself of my identity and wasn't stopping at all? But then again, he was staring at me like he did before, at Wychwood, like I hung the moon and stars. His flattering attention made heat rise to burn my cheeks.

"I'll, um, put the kettle on," I said meekly. My voice was starting to get a bit scratchy so it would be black tea with honey for me. I was back on-stage tomorrow, and then I'd get to rest until Wednesday. While I waited for the kettle to boil, I got out my

best, well, my only tea tray and placed it on the kitchen table, then I added the teacups, honey, and the milk jug. When the kettle whistled, I wet the tea leaves, then added the pot and the tea strainer to the tray. I took it all over to the couch and placed the tray on the steamer trunk. Percy had finally removed his coat and scarf. He'd placed the coat beside mine on a hook behind the door. I rather liked the look of his smart black greatcoat hanging beside mine.

“Oh, my goodness! Do you compose your own songs?” Percy said all of a sudden. He was holding the loose sheets of manuscript paper I used to jot down lines of inspiration. They'd been spread out on the couch. Sometimes words would buzz around seeking a rhyme or a melody and when that happened, I couldn't truly rest until the words were out of my head.

“Indeed I do,” I said, Percy's green eyes were luminous. His smile was wide and happy, with the innocence of a puppy. It seems there was more to this something between Percy and me than lustful attraction.

“Were the performances I saw tonight of your original songs?” he enquired.

“Yes. When I create a character, I give them a back story and I write a song or two to fit. My audience loves them.”

I liked to offer the complete package, as it were, and I had so much fun creating my characters, like Miss Fortune, the crystal gazer who sang a mark's future. She had a glass eye that would pop out when she did a reading. I wore a headscarf with a secret pocket where I stowed the eye, and I kept the audience on tenterhooks just waiting for the eye, a painted marble, to pop out and roll across the stage. And another character I created was named Lord Dickey; he was a saucy devil who favoured ladies of ill-repute over his dear lady wife. I had to be very clever with the wording of his songs so as not to get done for obscenity. I suppose my act was unique in that way, as other actors used song books, or had a lyricist who would compose for them. My act was

all me. Mr. Grayson was ever so supportive, and he kept pushing me to write more, to try new songs out on our audiences, and come up with new characters. He was delighted when I debuted a new song and it got a favourable response. I was ever so lucky to have a boss like Mr. Grayson.

PERCY

I liked George's cozy apartment room above the theater, with its artistically draped oriental silks, French brocades, and voiles. It was unconventional and bohemian, not dour and dark like my own lackluster rooms at Blackwood Hall. I was always drawn to the romantic, artistic life and would have chosen to be a writer if I hadn't been saddled with the inherited pressure of the family business. I knew I was luckier than most in that I not only received a university education, but on graduation, I walked straight into a career, within Harcourt Press.

I was an only child, a son and heir, and I'd never had a say on how I chose to live my life. My grandfather and father decided the trajectory my life would take when I was born. I'd attended boarding school at Harrow from the age of ten to eighteen, and then went onto study English at Cambridge. Mother decided that I would marry by the age of twenty-eight and give her at least three grandchildren. And thus, it was the tradition of well-connected families to enhance their standing through marriage. Many grubby men of business were keen to marry off their daughter to me in a bid to be connected to the Harcourt Press Empire. I'd respectfully fought against all possible pairings presented to me since I'd joined the family business. They were all fine girls, I was sure, but no, not for me. I was determined I would not imprison a girl in a loveless marriage, not for my mother, not for anyone. I would rather remain a bachelor and damn this prison of family duty to hell!

In my everyday life I would never dare to indulge in a lingering look at a handsome gentleman. So terrified was I of somebody seeing me looking at a man in a lustful way that I suppose I switched myself off and became agreeable Percy, the boss's son. But here, now, I watched George stride gracefully across his room and as I had

no doubts about his preference or his attraction to me, I openly admired his powerful athletic thighs and calves and my, what a fine arse! I smoothed my moustache and licked my lips. When I'd met George as Miss Georgette, he was wearing a lady's gown and so I hadn't witnessed the exquisite masculine shape of him. Tonight, having recently come off stage he wore loose, casual clothing, navy blue trousers, a white cotton undershirt with a low neckline and black braces, with navy felt slippers on his feet. His physique was virtually that of a ballet dancer, robust shapely thighs, nicely muscled buttocks, a flat abdomen, and sharp boned shoulders. I could see the androgyny in his face and how, depending on the application of greasepaint, he could appear masculine or feminine. I was quite in awe, bedazzled by his mercurial nature, and I could not help but look my fill. For who knew how this meeting would progress, and after tonight, I might never have the honour of a second invitation to his room. I realized then that George was talking. He paused and pivoted to meet my gaze. Our looks collided and heat burned through me. He turned away first.

"I'll, um, put the kettle on," he said nervously and even his nervousness made heat coil in my belly. I supposed I'd drunk a fair bit with my colleagues so that explained why I was so feather headed, but it didn't explain why I was tongue tied, embarrassingly so. I found I was incredibly hot, and yet I was frozen to the spot. What the devil was wrong with me? I'd never been so overwhelmed by my attraction to any man.

George busied himself setting a kettle of water on the stove and then putting a teapot, cups, and saucers on a tray. He was coming over with the tray now and I supposed I'd better sit down. I willed my legs to move. I removed my coat and hung it on a hook behind the door, and then I hurried to the couch where I picked up some of the papers that were strewn there so I could sit. I glanced down at the sheaf of papers I held and realized they were manuscript papers and notes...for poems, or song lyrics.

George set the tray on the steamer trunk and sat down on the far end of the couch. I was stunned, joyfully so when he told me he wrote because that meant we both

shared a love of words.

Oftentimes a composer worked with a lyricist and would then have the songs published in a manuscript book and sold widely. Singers could purchase the books and perform what was popular with the general public while the composer received a cut of the royalties from sales. But George composed, wrote, and performed his songs. He was a unique talent and I couldn't quite believe an actor with such dazzling flair wasn't on stage at the Gaiety, or snapped up to be off touring America.

"I was um...touched by the poem in your note," he said softly, "It was lovely."

"Oh, thank you." I felt the heat rise to colour my cheeks. "I...I write too," I revealed awkwardly, "But I guess you know that already," I fumbled. "I mostly write poetry."

"Is that your profession? Are you a poet?"

"Oh, no, no I'm an editor...for the Archaeological Journal . Although, I do endeavor to become a real poet."

"How does one become a real poet? The way I see it, if you write poetry, you're a poet!"

He was right of course, "My dream is to publish a book of poetry. I hope to do so this year, so I guess, then I will believe I'm a real poet."

"And how will you do that...publish your poetry?"

"I'm rather lucky on that score. My family owns a publisher...not of books, of newspapers, and periodicals. Harcourt Press," I revealed. George's brows rose with interest.

“I’ve heard of them, they print the Daily Gazette, don’t they! So, you can get a print book made of your poetry? That’s exciting. I’d buy a copy! Would you sign it for me?” His smile was intoxicating.

I wished I had the courage to tell him that if this book did come into being it was because of him, and how his mercurial beauty inspired me.

“So, how do you like your tea?” he asked as he picked up the tea strainer, held it over one of the teacups, and poured.

“Hot is always good,” I joked.

George laughed and triumphant pleasure rushed through me at knowing I had made this clever actor laugh. He poured a second cup.

“How old are you, Percy Harcourt?” he asked in a low, playful tone.

“Twenty-six, and you?”

“What do you think?” George teased, stirring a spoonful of honey into his black tea.

“Hmmm...” I considered his profile, and feeling the boldness of the beer I’d consumed earlier, I leaned in, cupped his cheek with my palm and made him turn to face me. I had never acted so audaciously in all my days, but here with George it felt safe to be me. The teaspoon was abandoned in the teacup as I claimed George’s full attention. His skin was smooth, freshly shaved. His mousy brown hair with natural waves was adorable. I traced my thumb over his cheek and then lower to gently slide over his plump lower lip. I pinned him with my eyes all the while, noting the fierce challenging look he sent in return.

“Maybe twenty-one or twenty t—“

I never got to complete my sentence because George launched himself across the couch and pressed his lips to mine.

Everything changed then.

I wasn't in the habit of kissing a fellow on the mouth because I was terrified of someone finding out and reporting me to my father, or to the authorities! But, given the chance with a man who understood— .

Our first kiss wasn't the soft and romantic lips pressing together that I'd envisaged in my many imaginings and day dreams. I found it an almost painful surrender to give in after a lifetime of believing that what I desired was shameful and sinful. But George's soft lips upon mine felt so good, so right, and then I groaned involuntarily as passion erupted inside of me. His seeking kiss was a key, and I opened to George, welcoming him into my arms, and my mouth. We were men starved of touch and affection, ordinarily fearful of reaching out in case of rejection. Our joining was desperate, kissing, sucking, and nipping at one another, our hands tangled in the other's hair. The full length of his body, thrumming with precious life was pressed to mine. Tears sprang to my eyes with the release of such intense passion. How could something as simple as a kiss undo me? I could feel the hardness of George's slender prick pressing against my belly. I'd never experienced a sensation like it. I was sure he could feel my arousal too because he moved then, rutting against it, the exquisite new sensation making me cry out in surprise because the rocking friction felt so—damnably—exquisite!

That guttural cry pulled George out of whatever fever had led to his audacious move. He pulled away and glared at me in a strangely accusatory manner. His lips glistened and were puffy from our kisses, he was panting as he said,

“Why did you go without saying goodbye?”

I didn't understand his wounded tone, "I...I beg your pardon?"

"At Wychwood, we danced something magical. We had a connection. I thought you'd felt it too. But then you were gone. What did I do wrong? Why didn't you at least say goodbye?"

It hit me then that my unexpected departure had hurt his feelings. I'd had no idea. I felt rather rotten about leaving at the time, but there was no alternative.

"You did nothing wrong; I assure you. And I did feel it...the connection. I do. God forgive me." I pressed my face into my hands, thoroughly ashamed of my bad manners and of running off without a word. I looked up and met George's wounded glare. "Honestly, it wasn't my intention to vanish. I was taken aside by Mr. Joshua."

"Oh...he didn't tell me that. He just said you'd left."

"I have no experience of...intimacies with men. And it was my first night at a house of that nature. I caused a little drama...a social faux-pas, so to speak. I saw you and that was it for me. No one else could interest me. But you and I were...noticed because you returned my attentions. I suppose other men didn't like me monopolizing your time and someone commented to Mr. Joshua. He took me aside and explained there could be no favoritism, and he reminded me of the house rules. I thought it best to leave so that we didn't—"

"Oh," George's face was flushed pink. He bit on a hangnail and sat back against the couch. He was quiet for a moment, his gaze lowered shyly, before he admitted,

"I, um...suppose the both of you did me a favour. I would have...you know...if you'd asked me a second time." George looked at me then and there was fire in his eyes. He bit his kiss swollen lower lip again, sending me a sultry stare that communicated more than words could say. I gulped, my Adams Apple bobbing in my

throat. It was my turn to say “Oh,” as I realized what he meant. George extended a hand and without another thought I took it. He clutched my trembling fingers as he stood and pulled me up from the couch. We hadn’t even taken a sip of tea. This was the moment I’d dreamt of and written poetry about. Finally, I was going to touch another man.

George led me across the room and behind the crimson velvet privacy drapes to where a large double bed was hidden, piled with blankets and pillows. Then he dropped my hand and looked at me as if I was his next meal.

“Will you let me bugger you or do you wish to bugger me?” he asked matter-of-factly. I was rather startled to hear the candid, crude question. My chest felt tight. No one had ever spoken to me like this before. Our shared attraction was so new and fragile, and, even though I desired him immensely I wasn’t ready to go that far.

“I’ve, um, never done that before, or had it done to me,” I admitted hoping he didn’t think me an inexperienced fool. “Can we do...other things? I’d like very much to...to touch you...and kiss some more,” I said tentatively.

“Very well,” George didn’t seem disappointed at all as he pulled back the bed covers. He shrugged the braces off his shoulders and then dragged his undershirt over his head, displaying a pale, hairless, well-sculpted chest. I watched him, in awe of the acres of his pale, unblemished skin. My fingers shook as I hurriedly followed suit, scrabbling out of my garments until they were a messy pile of fabric on the floor. I didn’t care to pick the garments up and fold them, there were other, more favourable things I wanted to do with my time. I stood nervously before George as naked as he was. I licked my lips in anticipation. George’s eyes were alight with desire as we took one another in, our pricks both jutting out for the joust, displaying a mutual appreciation of what we saw.

George gripped his prick and pulled the gossamer skin back revealing the glistening

plum head. He pumped it a few times as he looked his fill. My mouth watered. I hadn't seen a boy grip and pump his stand like that since my school days. The sight of it thrilled me.

"Come 'ere," he said and like a marionette I stepped forward, our erect pricks facing off like fencing foils. He ran his hands over the blond hair on my chest. His were the fine-boned hands of a musician, and the trail of his fingertips sent a shiver to my bawsack. I gasped. And in Miss Georgette's teasing voice he asked,

"Now, tell me, fine fellow. What's your pleasure?"

"You are!" I reached up and cupped his handsome face with both hands, and then gazed into the fires of his eyes.

"You are relief, a cool breeze on a hot summer's day. Your kisses intoxicate like wine, and as I look into your eyes, I long to make you mine."

Oh! I'd rather surprised myself. I had no idea where those poetic words sprang from, and I was worried for a moment that I'd sounded like a ninny. But George's expression sort of...melted and he sighed, "Oh Percy," and then he was on me, wrapping his arms around my neck, and the glorious feeling of his bare skin pressing to mine made my thoughts white out. I was forced backward, and pulled him with me onto the bed. I lay back on the cool sheet that smelled of him, and he was atop me, his thighs straddling my hips, the soft dark hair of his calves brushing against my skin, and our cockstands side by side. The sensation of his silken prick and wrinkled sac against my skin was divine. He gathered both cocks in his hand and frigged us together. The sensation made me whimper, a sound I couldn't ever recall making. George leaned in then, and my lips and throat were devoured. All I could do was cling on to his warm firm buttocks, pulling him closer as George chose an undulating rhythm, and proceeded to undo me, kiss by kiss.

GEORGE

I'd always taken pleasure in romantic verse, but having Percy hold me and look into my eyes while reciting poetic words of adoration made my knees weak. The only solution was to hold on to him and plant a kiss. He tasted like hoppy beer, and honey, and his scent was of orange and bergamot mixed with his personal musk. Percy Harcourt was the most beautiful man I'd ever had in my arms and the first in my bed.

You see, no one wants to attract scorn or humiliation for whom they choose to love. Men like us have shadow love lives, if we have any private life at all. We are forced to find secret places for trysts, to find ways to express our mutual devotion without being too revealing. We use codes, flowers, colours, and allegories to express ourselves, communicating to men who share our preference. I've worried since I realized I was an invert that I would never know true love or have the chance to express my adoration for another. I've longed for it so. But Percy knew, oh yes, he understood.

His naked flesh was warm and firm as he writhed beneath me; his hands gripping my arse, pulling me tightly in so together our pricks could create that sweet, delicious friction we craved. I couldn't get enough of him, reveling in the soft tickle of his moustache against my sensitive lips. I couldn't stop kissing him, but he made me. I was surprised when he placed his hands on my shoulders and eased me back and said a breathy "S...stop."

I wondered if I'd done something wrong. I sat up on his thighs and looked down at the gloriously debauched sight before me. His tossed blond curls like threads of spun gold, a halo upon my white bed sheet. A soft pelt of hair on Percy's upper chest led in

a tempting trail over his flat belly to his groin. His pego stood defiant among a nest of honey blonde. The cock wasn't too long, but my god, his girth would be quite the mouthful. I was game to give it a try!

“Are you alright? Did I go too fast? I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I've just wanted you from the moment I set eyes on you. I've spent weeks dreaming about you, wondering who you are,” I said in a rush to justify my impulsive actions. Percy just smiled widely and put his fingertips over my lips to shut me up.

He chuckled. “I just needed a breath, George. I'm a little overwhelmed,” he said softly. “This is all new to me. I've only kissed two fellows in my whole life, and I've never had a tumble with a man. Not that I tumble with women...although mother would be delighted if I did.” I gave him a bemused look and he cocked a brow. “I'll tell you about that another time. I do not want to think of my mother while I'm naked and painfully aroused.”

I couldn't keep in my laugh then and slid off his thighs to lie beside him. Percy threaded his fingers into mine and tugged me closer in an attempt to stop my laughter. “Look, I just don't want to rush to the end, that's all.”

“You do know that you can spend more than once in a day, don't you?” I said in jest.

“Oh, um, really?” Percy looked a little embarrassed and then I truly understood that, even though he was older, I was more experienced.

“I promise, I won't lose interest after the first time, you can be certain of that!” I reassured.

I suppose that growing up in the theater had given me more of an opportunity to mess about! I'd kissed a few boys who were on the traveling circuit, cos they were here and then gone, which was safer all round. I'd had two men proposition me to bugger

them last summer. After the first fellow's initial pain and discomfort, we pushed on and I think he enjoyed it. A few weeks later, the second fellow asked me to do it. He told me that there was a special place inside the back passage and when my pego stroked it he felt like heaven opened up inside him. I thought that sounded rather nice and it explained why men sought such a joining. I supposed I'd like to try it sometime.

"Can we take the edge off and then?" I asked slowly walking my fingers down his chest.

Percy raised a quizzical brow. "Very well. Let's do that and take things at a more...leisurely pace, aye!"

It pleased me that he didn't just want a quick fuck and to rush off, for no matter how horny I was, I'd still like to get to know him.

"I want to take my sweet time with you, Percy Harcourt. Now, sit up against the headboard," I directed. He did as I asked and then I straddled his thighs. Making a tunnel of my hands, I gathered our half-hard cockstands together. As soon as my pego touched his, Percy whimpered. It was such a needy little sound and it made me burn for him. With two strokes my pego was as hard as a battering ram. We watched as his prick filled with blood too to make the crown ruddy and the shaft stiff with mouthwatering veins. I swiped the clear liquid seeping from the head and put my finger to my lips. His eyes grew as wide as saucers as he saw me taste him. He bit his plump bottom lip.

"Do I taste...alright?" he asked uncertainly.

"Lover, you're delicious. Now, are you ready?"

"I don't think I'll last, but—"

And so, I began moving my hips, holding our pricks together so we could rub off on one another. My eyes darted to observe Percy, his kiss swollen mouth glistening, his blond curls a glorious mess and his stormy green eyes sparkling with lust as he watched our pecks rub together. He had the most adorable patches of flushed skin on his cheeks, like he'd applied rouge. His breaths panted lightly and I was having so much fun undoing him. His fingers trembled, and he gripped handfuls of the bed sheet, as if holding on to the fabric was the only thing stopping him from taking flight.

"Pinch your nipples," I directed. He gave me an alarmed look. "Do it!" he did so, "Harder," I directed and again he complied. He was good at taking direction, this one! Then he moaned, and the sound was so erotic it made my cockhead swell. This was the first time Percy had allowed himself to be vulnerable in the company of a fellow. His luminous green eyes affixed mine and we shared a rare moment of awareness and connection. It was beautiful and I felt honoured to be his first. His bawls drew in tight to his body and his prick erupted while shudders wracked through him in a whole-body spasm. Watching Percy unravel and spend so copiously sent me over and my grip on us both became slick with our spill.

He looked up when I released us. I felt almost shy as I met his smiling eyes.

"Well, that was..." he grinned, sated, flushed, and adorably handsome.

"Yes, it was." We were silent for a while, just looking and smiling, not needing to say a word because we said it all with our eyes.

"We appear to have made a bit of a mess," I said, running a finger through the pools of mingled semen on his belly. "I guess I'd better clean us up," I suggested, then moved off his thighs. My inner thigh muscles ached as I strode to the sink, washed our seed from my hands and chest, and then I got a clean cloth from a drawer and wet it. I hurried to the bed and washed the pearls of our spill from his chest and belly. I

returned to the sink and washed the rag out before calling.

“You can stay over if you want. There’s no point going out onto Drury Lane this late unless you’re looking to get robbed.” I sauntered back to the bed and got in, pulling up the covers to stave off the chill. Percy eased himself down to lay beside me.

“Hmmm, you care for my safety?” he said curiously.

“Course I do.”

“Well,” he drawled ponderously, “If it’s a toss-up between remaining in the arms of a devilishly handsome actor, or fleeing from ner-do-well’s in the dead of night...hmmm, I do believe I’ll accept your invitation to stay.”

Laughing, Percy rolled me over and eased on top of me, taking the dominant position. It seemed that his first time with another had elicited new found confidence. It pleased me to have given him that. I liked his weight on me, his heated skin pressed to mine, the thrumming of his heart so close. I scrabbled to pull the covers higher over us and we lay snug like that for a while. Then he began kissing my nape, and squashed between our warm bellies, my pego took an interest again. I joined in as hands began to roam. I enjoyed the feeling of the coarse blond hair on his legs as I ran my fingers from thigh to calf. He eased up to adjust his prick. It was leaking its clear fluid of arousal again, and I swiped my finger through it. With his eyes on me, I sucked the finger into my mouth again. His taste was bittersweet, salty, and musky, but not at all unpleasant.

“My God, George, how you undo me!” Percy’s deep rasp was sinful. He eased down my body, kissing all the way, his moustache adding to the tickling sensation, until he came to my slender cockstand. He observed it as it filled with blood and bobbed. He gave the tip and exploratory lick, hummed in surprise and then he boldly took me into his mouth. The shock of that wet heat made me buck my hips off the bed, sending my

prick further into Percy's throat. He took all I had to give, moaning as he sucked and explored the meander of the prominent veins on my length with his tongue.

"Touch my bollocks, you can suck them if you want," I begged. He paused in gamahuching me and asked, "You like that?"

"Gods yes. Have you never had your bollocks sucked while being frigged?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"You will!"

PERCY

Languid, in my post-sex haze, I sauntered dreamily down Drury Lane and turned onto Kingsway to hail a hansom cab. It was just after eight o'clock in the morning and the city was already a bustle. The night had been intense and marvelous. I'd had no idea that sexual union could be, well, fun! The act was taught by the Church as the right of man, an act of solemn duty for procreation and not for pleasure. The boys at school shared ribald jokes about the act, and at university male virginity was seen as a burden and humiliation that a man must rid himself of as quickly as possible. My university friends used sex as a means of testing one's manhood and as a reason for braggadociousness. I'd played along and in fear of a mocking, said I'd been with a girl, but secretly I'd remained a virgin. Maybe I'd been so intimidated by their machismo that I'd cut myself off from what intimacy could be? And of course, I was an invert and did not wish to endure the social sanction that revelation would have received. But finally, at the age of twenty-six I was no longer a virgin...and surprisingly, I was still me. I'd spent so many years, my head in the clouds reading the romantic poets with their highfalutin ideal of love. I'd thought that sex would transform me in some way, maybe it had, but what I'd shared with George was neither a reason to brag, nor the romantic ideal, it was deeply personal and I wanted to hold it to my chest and protect it like a fragile precious thing. And yet, George and I barely knew one another, so how could this connection be real?

I hadn't slept much at all; not after George looked at me like he had when we made love, Oxford style. He watched me with such tenderness in his gaze as I held my legs up and pressed them tight together, and then he thrust his slicked prick between my thighs, brushing over my bawsack, his hand frigging my stand. I'd found it almost unbearable to be so naked, so vulnerable with him, but George had made it good for

me, good for both of us, I hoped. I wanted him to do it again, to go further the next time.

We'd agreed to see one another for luncheon on Tuesday and, honestly, I couldn't be happier. I hailed a cab to take me to Greenwich, and so lost was I in writing pretty words in my head, that it felt like I closed my eyes and then a moment later the cab pulled up outside Blackwood Hall.

It was Saturday morning and according to the Grandfather clock in the foyer, just after nine a.m. I heard the twittering of ladies and intermittent laughter in the drawing room. Thoughtless with happiness, I boldly knocked on the door and stepped in.

"Ah! Good morning mother, ladies," I beamed, unable to stop from smiling. Mother was taking tea with her Guardians of the Poor church group. At the sudden interruption I received several scandalous glares from the older ladies. Then I looked down at myself, wearing wrinkled garments that had spent a night on the floor of George's room while I lay in his bed of seduction and sin. I supposed I did look a little worse for wear rolling in after a night out!

"The good Lord has blessed us with a sunny spring day, Ladies," I offered to cover my embarrassment.

Mother eyed me suspiciously. "Are you quite alright Percy?"

"Yes, yes, quite alright. Just appreciating the blessings of the day, mother. You look radiant today mother, simply radiant," I added. This was met with more glances of suspicion.

"Do you want something Percival? We are having a private meeting," Mother reprimanded.

“Apologies. Um, is, er...is father home?” I was sure that after the church group left, I would get quite the telling off for my strange behaviour!

“Your father is in his study, and don’t forget, we’re entertaining Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, and their daughters, Angeline and Victoria this evening. I do hope you’ll have...bathed by then.”

Ouch, that was quite the barb, and in front of her ladies too! I’d quite forgotten that mother had arranged yet another interminable dinner to force me into socializing with more daughters of the elite. I nodded and wished the group good day, and then I stalked through the halls towards my father’s study. I was brimming with inspiration after my night with George, not only for my poetry, but I’d also mulled over an idea that could be beneficial for both of us, however, I’d need to run it past father first.

When I reached the study, which had also been grandfather’s study I paused, straightened my garments and then knocked.

“Enter,” he barked. I opened the door and stepped in. The room still smelled like Theo and a pang of sadness hit me. I recalled the secrets he shared only with me, and I renewed my vow to do as he’d advised and live my life as I believed was fitting, not society. Theo’s token to gain entrance to Wychwood had been the best gift I’d ever received. It led me to meet a glorious man and now I would venture to know him as a friend and a lover!

My father appeared impeccably dressed and his hair, mutton chops, and moustache were well-groomed and oiled. However, I could not miss the tired eyes. I’d suggested he should delegate more tasks to his underlings, but he was a Harcourt through and through, so he took his duty seriously. He was seated behind grandfather’s desk, but the huge slab of mahogany dwarfed him. Victor Harcourt was slighter of build than grandfather Theodore had been and so it always took me as strange to see father in Theo’s place.

Father looked up from his paperwork. “Ah, Percy! Have you just gotten home; you rogue?” he said with a wry grin. “You do look rather chipper. I do hope you were careful and she was worth it,” he chuckled. “Your mother didn’t sleep a wink, waiting to hear you coming in. I did tell her that we men need the freedom to sow our wild oats before marriage, and our Percy is a chip off the old block,” he smiled with self-satisfaction.

I plastered the expected grin on my face but did not favour talking of intimate matters with my father. I was aware of mother’s recent religious fervor and my father’s dislike of the sinful behaviour of sodomites. If only he’d known his own father was an invert and I was a chip from that same block! I was sure that the revelation would see me disinherited and the shock of not getting grandchildren, for I had no plans to become a father, would probably kill mother.

“I made the mistake of interrupting mother’s ladies at tea. She was not best pleased with me,” I admitted.

“Ha! Your mother always puts on airs for her ladies, serves you right. I always hide in here when the Guardians of the Poor are meeting. I have the feeling that if they got a hold of me they’d turn me upside down and shake every last coin out of my pockets...for the needy, of course.”

“Always so wise, father!” I laughed. “Speaking of your doubtless wisdom, I’ve had a business idea and I wanted to run it past you before I do anything about it.”

“Ahh, there’s nothing like a good tuppung to get the brain sparking, eh!” he said tapping a finger on his head. “Come, take a seat, and tell me about your idea.”

We each took one of the comfortable high-backed chairs by the hearth and I felt veritably giddy with the swirl of ideas in my head.

“Has Harcourt Press ever considered music publishing?” I began.

Father was quiet for a long moment of thought. “I don’t believe so. I suppose that this is an area you’d be interested in pursuing?”

“It is. I’m acquainted with several composers, and I’ve recently met an excellent lyricist. I don’t believe that they are contracted anywhere. With our printing and distribution connections I would like to set up a new business to print sheet music. Say, tunes from music halls, piano music, short Operas, and musical plays, in sheet and book form. I would ensure the composers earned a royalty, while their music would be shared across the Empire.”

“That is quite the vision, Percy. There are a handful of other musical manuscript publishers who focus on niches like waltzes, brass band marches, or even religious songs. I do believe Hopwood is involved in music publishing.” Father paused, his right index finger tapping ponderously on his lips. “Yes, John Hopwood is a good sort. He’s a member of my club. I’ll introduce you to him if you’d like and you can pick his brain.”

“Thank you. It would be beneficial to speak to someone in this line of business.”

“And, any thoughts on how would you finance this endeavor?”

“I want to invest my inheritance from grandfather.”

“Hmm...Good, good. I’d say he’d be very proud to see you stepping out with business ideas of your own. God rest his soul! You will, of course, need to do due diligence, write a business proposal and talk to James Adler at the bank. While you’re at it, have a talk with our lawyers about the contracts too. I’ll write to Adler and request an appointment. You can approach Oliver Simmons from legal on Monday morning, yes? He’s your man!”

“Is he indeed. I was actually out with Simmons and Edwards from the legal department last night. Did you know Edwards is getting married tomorrow? We had an impromptu bachelors outing.”

“Ah, that explains why you smell rather...ripe. Go clean yourself up boy! I’ll write a few letters and get the ball rolling.”

“Thank you, father, your advice has given me much to think about.” I stood feeling a vigor and purpose I’d not known for a long time.

“I’ll see you at dinner tonight. I hope you’ve still got some lead in your pencil for the Campbell gals!” Father snickered. I offered a fake smile to appease him but I was not looking forward to the dinner. There was so much else going on in my mind that was of greater importance, plans to make, poems to write, a darling boy to moon over!

I hurried up to my rooms then called my manservant Sidney to draw a bath. I hadn’t washed at George’s because he didn’t have the facilities, just a sink, and a blessed flush latrine.

“How the devil do you keep clean if you only have a sink?” I’d asked.

“I go to the Turkish bathhouse in Jermyn Street three times a week. It’s not only a lovely place to bathe, the steam and hot air is good for the lungs and helps keep my voice healthy.” I hadn’t considered that. I supposed George needed to ensure he retained healthy habits so that his voice remained pitch perfect.

“I could show you what a Turkish bath is all about if you’d like?” he’d suggested with a sinful grin.

“I suppose it could be an interesting experience,” I’d replied, although I did wonder if my cockstand could be kept under control in the steamy heated pool surrounded by

naked male flesh, with my, what was he? My friend? My paramour? George's kisses still tingled on my lips and as I lay in my blessedly hot bath, I recounted all of the delicious sinful things we'd done to one another's bodies, many of which were previously unknown to me, let alone the acts that made me moan with pleasure. My flesh was far more sensitive than I could ever have guessed, and I would be forever grateful to George for the tender care he displayed while he undid me.

Dinner proceeded much as I'd expected. Cook provided an excellent meal, and mother was in her element as hostess, over egging the pudding, as it were, by making many overtly flattering comments about my achievements, all to make me appear to be a good catch. The Campbell daughters were pleasant enough, well turned out, much like display mannequins in a dressmaker's window; but sadly, they had about as much personality too! I remembered my manners and behaved like a gentleman as I made several attempts at conversation. Mr. Campbell constantly interrupted before his daughters could speak, and matching my mother, he spoke in glowing terms about what a good match I could make if I should care to court either Angeline or Victoria. I would rather have heard their replies, and not their fathers, but, no matter, I did not succumb to their charms. I thought of how wonderful it would be if I brought Miss Georgette home and introduced her to mother. That wicked thought made me smile inside. I remained at the table until just after the final course, when father stood and suggested we men should retire to the smoking room for a cigar. But I'd had enough of this charade. I stood up and bowed to both girls, then said,

“While it has been a pleasure to talk with you and enjoy a delightful meal it would be remiss of me to lead either of you on a merry dance. You see I am not seeking a match, no matter how my dear mother tries to force the issue. I endeavor to focus my life on business and leisurely pursuits, but not marriage. However, I do hope you both find a suitor.”

I honestly don't know where I found the confidence to finally take my stand but I did not regret a word of it. After I uttered those words a silence fell, like all sound had been sucked out of the dining room. Then sound returned. Mother gasped and clutched at her chest, like I'd shot her.

"Percy!" she exclaimed sounding mortified. "Victor, are you not going to say anything?" Mother admonished waspishly.

"What's to say Evangeline? Our son is headstrong and determined, just like my father, and he has chosen his path." He then turned to Mr. Campbell whose face was puce with rage and said,

"Forgive me Jonah. Unfortunately, a match will not be made between our families, but I do hope you enjoyed the meal and our hospitality. You are most welcome to join me for a cigar!"

"This...this is an outrage. You have taken me for a fool, Harcourt," Campbell roared as he tossed his napkin on the table and stood. "Girls, Madeline, we're leaving."

Mother's face flushed crimson and she stood too, her chair screeching on the parquet floor of the dining room before she too stormed out.

Oh dear.

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GEORGE

I'd taken Percy out through the back staircase and left him in the alley at the stage door. In the open we'd shaken hands like proper gentlemen do, but the looks we shared were scorching and so loaded with desire we could have melted the tar off the road!

"I very much enjoyed our evening. I hope to meet up with you again soon. I would like to continue to get to know you," Percy said formally. "Would you meet me for a drink perhaps? Browns Hotel has a very nice tea room," he suggested quite innocently. I thought that, yes, I would like to become friends and take the time to socialize like ordinary fellows do.

"Is Tuesday at two p.m. too early?" I asked.

"I suppose I could take a late lunch. I can tell you then about an idea that I germinated overnight," he said cryptically.

"Why sir, if you had the capacity to think of other things...we weren't doing it right!" I replied in Miss Georgette's suggestive voice.

"Hmm...I do believe we need more practice then!" We both burst out laughing. I longed to pull Percy back into my arms, but as we were in public and there was spying eyes everywhere, I didn't dare.

"Take the next left off Drury Lane and walk through to Kingsway; you'll have more of a chance of getting a cab there at this time in the morning," I directed. Percy

nodded.

“Until Tuesday,” he bowed and his fine form kept my gaze as he turned and walked down the back alley and onto the bustling Drury Lane. Men could get away with effeminate affectations and acting queer in the theater, but outside of theater circles I was always on my guard, worried about accusations of unlawful behaviour that could destroy my fledgling career. I closed the back gate and stood against it, looking up at the windows on the crush of buildings that backed on to the Middlesex’s lot, wondering if anyone had seen us. I told myself if they had, they would have seen the ordinary exchange of two friends having a natter.

It had been a wonderful night though, the best of my life. I returned to the theater and as my pocket watch said it was just after eight in the morning I lay in bed for another couple of hours mooning over what a time we’d had. Percy was inexperienced, and I hadn’t wanted him to feel inadequate. I wanted to show him how good it could be to lay with a fellow, and my, he was a quick study. He told me what he found pleasurable, ensuring a delicious give and take. Every time I touched him, he’d looked at me in awe, like I was precious. He didn’t try to take the lead, but let me have my way, trusting me to make it good for him. Seeing his expression when he reached his peak will stay with me forever. I’d sighed and rolled over, he’s followed, pulling me back against his chest.

As I now lay alone in bed, I imagined his warmth at my back. I couldn’t wait to see him again and I hoped to make him fly many more times.

When the curtain was down, the empty stage was a great place to warm up my body and my voice. On show days I liked to get on stage first, even though all I had for lighting was a couple of gas wall lamps and the ghost light. The limelighters were usually in early to check the gas footlights and set the limelight for the evening

performance. I always did my stretches with Eloise, although I couldn't bend and contort my body in the way she did, but Eloise wasn't in yet. I was desperate to tell her about last night with Percy. I couldn't keep still, so I walked in a circle around the stage, and then I skipped, and jogged while singing scales to myself. I'd stopped moving and was singing to fine tune when, out of the corner of my eye I noticed Mr. Grayson standing off stage left shielded by a drape of the curtain. I didn't know why he was there. It was just after midday and Grayson didn't usually come in until at least four p.m on a Saturday. He didn't watch, or even spy on my warm-ups, or rehearsals, so the fact he was here skulking silently in the wings was peculiar and made me feel a little uncomfortable. His expression was odd too, and the look he was giving me wasn't the affable appraisal he showed me when we'd conversed face-to-face. I was confused for I'd always thought Mr. Grayson liked me. He'd been fond of our Violette, fond enough to let us live upstairs for free, and then let me stay on here when she'd passed so suddenly. I was dis comforted by that strange, calculating look he sent me, and I wondered what was behind it.

Eloise suddenly cart wheeled onto the stage and landed in front of me. "Sorry I'm late, I had quite the night, and boy, do I have some stories for you!" she beamed. She was wearing a white and blue striped Maillot Unitard which permitted modesty along with the freedom of movement she required as a contortionist. The garment accentuated her gorgeous caramel skin, and hugged her slim figure.

I reached to give her a welcoming hug and, in the process, leaned to her ear and whispered. "I've got some stories too. But be careful, Grayson's hiding in the wings and he's been acting all kinds of odd. He's been there for ages spying and he ain't said a word."

"Right then," Eloise said decisively as she pulled out of the hug. "We'd best get warmed up before the stage crew comes in." Then, a little louder she added, "You alright there Mr. Grayson?" I glared something fierce at Eloise. But it was only then that our boss stepped from the shadows and plastered a fake smile on his sallow face.

Mr. Alfred Grayson was in his sixties, and so skinny I was sure a stiff breeze could snap him. His skin had a yellowy-gray caste. His mutton chops and slicked back hair were the colour of an overcast sky. As far as I could see Mr. Grayson lived on a diet of smokes and drink, and if I'm honest, in all the time he'd been my boss I don't think I'd ever seen him eat solid food.

"Ah, there you are George," he wheedled with faux cheerfulness. "I been looking for you everywhere."

"Is that right?" I deadpanned. "What can I do for you Mr. Grayson?" I'd never felt resentful toward him before, Grayson had given me many opportunities, but I couldn't keep in my ire at being spied on.

"I, um, hear you had a meeting with a gentleman after the show last night," he began and my hackles rose automatically. Terrifying thoughts flashed through my mind. Does Mr. Grayson know I'm queer? Did he come back and hear Percy and me in my room? I was sure he'd left last night after the show, as was his nightly routine. Grayson had a house in Camden Town, a timid wife and two school aged kiddies, all of whom probably never saw him cos he was either here, on the look-out for new talent, in a pub, or with his latest squeeze.

"That Doris Higgins is one for the tittle-tattle isn't she. I honestly don't know why you keep her on, it's not as if she does her job...unless her job is—"

"GEORGE!" Eloise snapped sharply. Both Eloise and I knew that the only job Doris did was open her legs for our married boss. I glared at Mr. Grayson waiting for him to say something and when he didn't, I spoke up.

"What business is it of yours who I meet with? You ain't my keeper, and my private life is exactly that, private." I knew I was playing with fire. I relied on the goodwill of Mr. Grayson for my job and a place to live. I brought in the crowds well enough, but

he didn't own me. How dare he poke his nose into my private business. A surprising thought came to me then. Maybe it was time I moved out and got rooms elsewhere? I had a good nest egg saved. If I moved out Grayson would then have to pay for a proper night watchman! That would piss him right off! Mr. Grayson had been good natured towards me since he'd given me my break. He told me he was his star act, and he was grooming me for higher things. Last year he'd even mentioned the possibility of me going on a tour playing at theaters all over the country.

Mr. Grayson did not appreciate my waspish tone. His face took on a rictus of rage, and he barked, "It's my business when a bleedin' newspaper man is sniffing around my best boy. Now, what did he want, tell me?" Grayson demanded. I was taken aback.

"How do you know what he does?"

"Doris had a flirt with some of the fellows at his table. They all work at Harcourt Press, she said."

"So what? He works for Harcourt's. I don't understand why that's upset you like this. Is there a scandalous story in the Daily Gazette or something?"

"Well, err, no, not that I know of. Is that why he wanted to meet you, for a story?" Grayson pushed. "What did you tell 'im?" he snarled.

My blood was boiling at this point and I didn't care to answer his question. "My private business is private. And you'd do well to tell that nosey fussock you're shagging to steer well clear of me. I will not have that bint gossiping about me, you hear?"

Grayson gritted his teeth and grumbled, but he had nothing else left to say, so he just turned and stormed off. Exit stage left.

“What the bleedin’ hell was all that about?” Eloise asked, confused as we watched him go.

“I was goin’ to ask you the same thing,”

“Come on, let’s get our warm up done and then we’ll go up to mine, I’ve got a lot to tell you!”

“I saw your gent in the back alley when I left last night. He’s a pretty one,” Eloise revealed gleefully as I made us a nice cup of cocoa after our warm up. “Did you find out his name?”

“I found out more than his name!”

Eloise gasped in faux shock, “George! You dirt bird! Tell me all about it!” We shared a conspiratorial look, snickered, and then took our cups of hot cocoa to the couch. We put our mugs down on the steamer trunk. Eloise then sat cross legged at one end of the couch and I sat at the other and put my legs up to rest in her lap. She stripped off my sock and started to rub my feet. I loved having my feet rubbed. Eloise was tactile, and I was so comfortable with her, I swear if I was attracted to ladies, she’d have been my missus by now.

“You go first,” I suggested as I lay back with my hands behind my head, enjoying the foot massage.

“Very well. But you have to guess who I left with last night.” I could hear the self-satisfied smile in her voice. A pretty, young, and frankly, bendy girl like Eloise was very popular with the gentlemen, but Lou weren’t no prostitute. She was choosy about who she spent her time with, and knew how to play the game.

“Was it the bloke who bought you the French bodice?” I opened my eyes to see that Eloise shook her head, but kept her thumbs pressing deliciously on the soles of my aching feet.

“The Russian Duke?”

“Alexandrovich, oh gawd no! He smells of fishy farts.”

“Um...Whatsisname, Rupert Chatsworth, that nobby fellow who’s writing a play and looking for his ingénue?”

“Oh, Randy Rupert! He’s been doing the rounds alright. He did try and whisk me away, but nope, it wasn’t him.”

“Oh, come on Lou, you’ve got so many suitors I’ve lost count. Gimmie a break!”

“Fine! I left with Mademoiselle Marianne La Fleur,” she said with a twinkle in her playful blue eyes.

“Marianne Can-Can!” I gasped.

“Yep, Mon belle femme . You should have seen us. Me a contortionist, her with her long dancer’s legs wrapped around me!”

“LOU!” I said mirroring her early faux shock. “You could have sold tickets to that show!”

“Mari certainly knew how to tip the velvet and tickle le-fleur , if you get what I mean!”

I pulled my feet from her hands and we both curled up laughing. “You should have

seen the way all of them coves that hung around the stage door followed us to the pub, their tongues hanging out. As if either me, or Mari would have chosen one of them wastes of space. We got ‘em to buy us drinks and then we pretended to go to the latrine together. We did a runner out of the back door and went to mine.”

“You love playing with fire, Lou!”

“I really do! I’ve been on the circuit for five years and if I’ve seen one neck-or-nothing young blood, I’ve seen ‘em all. If men think they can buy me, let ‘em try. I ain’t getting up to no havey-cavey business with any old rake.”

I loved how feisty and determined Eloise was, and how she rebelled against what society expected of her. We were two peas in a pod in that respect, cos I too fought against the peg hole society wanted to push me into.

“So, are you gonna tell me about tall, blond and pretty?”

I melted back onto the couch and groaned. “Oh Lou, we had such a wonderful time. I think I love him!” I said as I theatrically clutched my hands to my chest. And do you know what my best friend did? She bloody laughed. She laughed so hard she slipped off the couch and onto the floor. I didn’t think that me professing my love for Percy after one night together was a laughing matter, but Eloise found it bloomin’ hilarious.

“Oi! What’s so funny?” I pouted, affronted.

“You. I’ve never seen a fellow so cock-drunk after a tumble! Oh Georgie, you’re such a romantic fop!” Eloise gracefully rose to her feet then sat on my lap and pulled me in for a hug. The pout remained firmly on my face. I didn’t appreciate being mocked when I’d opened my heart.

“Come on then, tell me about your beau,” she cajoled.

“I don’t think I will.” I turned away, nursing my injured pride and refused to look at her. Eloise pinched my cheeks and forced me to turn and face her.

“Don’t be like that, come on. I was only playing. Please, tell me about your beau.”

“Nope. My debauched secrets will remain in my heart under lock and key.” I mimed locking up my lips and threw the imaginary key over my shoulder. Eloise responded in her usual fashion.

“Tell me his name!” she demanded and then she set to tickling me into submission. I squirmed on the couch trying to buck her off me but Eloise was straddling me, clamping her thighs like a limpet on my legs. I always forgot how bloomin’ strong she was. I was breathless with laughter but finally submitted, “Okay, okay, his name’s Percy, Percy Harcourt.”

Thankfully, she stopped tickling me then and threw herself to the other side of the couch as we both took a moment to catch our breath. I reached for my cocoa now that it had cooled and took a long drink. Then I revealed, “He’s a poet, and he works at his father’s company as an editor.”

“Fancy!”

“He’s kind and funny and intelligent, and an awful good kisser. We talked and talked for hours...and err, got up to other things.”

“So, it was a good tumble?” she prodded.

I really didn’t want to go into intimate details. It was like the night I spent in Percy’s arms was so personal and fragile that I didn’t want to share it with anyone else. It was mine, special. And so I wagged my brows and hoped my grin said more than words.

“I’m happy for you George. You gonna see him again?”

“We’ve already made an arrangement,” I beamed. “It just felt easy to be with him. As soon as we got past the nerves it was like I’d known him for years,” I admitted.

“My old mum said that when you meet someone who makes you feel like you’re talking to yourself, that’s when you know you’ve found your soul mate.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked confused.

“It means that you’re so comfortable and safe with that person, you’re contented, like they’re the jigsaw piece that was missing.”

I understood what she meant, but I didn’t know if I went in for this soul mates’ stuff.

“Now, tell me, what’s going on with Grayson?” Eloise prodded.

“Doris has been flapping her gums. She must have told Grayson that I met with a man from Harcourt’s and decided I was selling some kind of salacious story to the papers?”

“His reaction was a bit suspicious; don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I’m just relieved that he didn’t accuse me of being a sodomite and make trouble for me.”

“This is the theater; we’ve got queer lads and lassies hiding in plain sight. It ain’t no one’s business how we get our pleasure,” Eloise insisted.

“I know that and you know that, but the law says different.”

“The law’s an arse. If you like your Percy, just be friends in public and discrete about where you get up to private business.”

“You going to see Mari again?”

“She’s got a contract to dance here for the next six months, so we’ve got plenty of time to get to know one another. I like her, and we had fun together... but...we’ll see.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” I agreed.

PERCY

On Monday morning I spied two envelopes on my desk. One bore the stamp of our family's private bank, Rothschild. The other envelope was addressed in flowing purple script. I opened the first envelope to see that a meeting was arranged with James Adler at the bank on Tuesday morning at ten a.m. The second contained, as I expected, a letter from our mysterious host at Wychwood to inform that the club would be open this coming Saturday. By then it would have been three weeks since the last party, and in those three weeks my life had changed immeasurably. No doubt Miss Georgette would be there. I wondered if I should attend, after all, I did not need to avail of the house as an illicit place to meet a male lover. George and I had formed an attachment that was nothing to do with the house, and therefore, we did not need to abide by house rules. But I supposed an evening of fine food; gaming, song, and dance would be welcome after a long week. I could take my joy in watching Miss Georgette perform.

I rang the bell to notify my secretary that I required assistance. When she opened the door I said, "Could you ask Mr. Simmons from the legal department to come and see me at his earliest convenience?"

"Very good, sir."

Around thirty minutes later Oliver Simmons knocked on my office door. He appeared a little confused as to why I'd asked for him, but I rose from my seat, shook his hand warmly and then gestured for him to take the chair in front of my desk.

"I'm speaking to you with my father's approval," I began, "but what we're about to

discuss must remain confidential, do you understand?"

My affable, mousy colleague sat erect in his chair, "Of course sir," he said eagerly.

I leaned forward, my hands flat on my desk and gave him a huge smile to ease his nerves.

"I was rather inspired by our night at the Middlesex," I admitted.

"Oh, it was a tremendous night, sir. Always look after your privates, " he sang tunelessly, "That song was so very funny. It hasn't left me!" he grinned.

I laughed too with the remembrance of the dashing Captain Rimmer.

"I'd never expected such a good bachelor party for Jonty," he added.

"Did the wedding go well?"

"Indeed, it did. They're off on honeymoon, two days at Clacton-on-Sea," he beamed with pride, as if he were the father of the bride.

"Good, good. Well, I won't beat around the bush." I clasped my hands together on the desk. "I'm considering starting a new publishing company. It will deal with popular musical manuscripts. I have a meeting with the bank tomorrow, but I'd like you to draw up a draft contract that I can provide to lyricists and composers whose work I wish to pursue. You'll need to look into what the standard royalty rate is for sales of loose sheet manuscripts and song book collections. I wish to ensure that the agreement is fair to both parties."

"This pleases me very much, sir. I can tell you now that my previous employment was with the Lighthouse Publishing Company. They dealt with licensing musical

manuscripts for hymns, carols, and congregational works. So, I am very much your man on this matter!" he beamed.

I sat back and mirrored his smile. "I had no idea of your past experience in this area. This is most advantageous. No wonder father told me to speak with you directly! I see I can leave this in your expert hands then."

"Indeed you can, Mr. Harcourt. I shall draw up a draft contract and have it ready for your appraisal by Wednesday, if that is agreeable."

"Yes, thank you. If Mr. Davies has a problem with you doing other tasks, please tell him to come and talk to me," I winked, ensuring the head of the legal department would not sanction Simmons for this extra-curricular task.

"I will do sir. And thank you so much for this opportunity." Simmons stood and we shook hands again as I showed him to the door.

Rothschild Bank was founded in Frankfurt, Germany in 1744. Our family had trusted our wealth with the bank since the early 1800s, and, with so many generational connections our family was held in high esteem. Mr. James Adler was our private banker and dealt with the family accounts. He was in his late forties, with blond thinning hair parted to the right and flattened with pomade. He had a heavy-set figure, and wore a dour black suit that made him look like an undertaker. He prized himself out of his captain's chair and rounded his desk to welcome me into his office.

"Ah, Mr. Harcourt. It's a pleasure to see you on this fine day. Please take a seat." He gestured to a chair and then retook his place behind his desk

"Your late grandfather Theodore left you an inheritance nest egg that he stipulated

was to be invested into a business. Your father alerted me that you have come to a decision on how to proceed. I believe the business will be publishing music manuscripts, is that correct?" he said with a succinct clipped affectation to his voice.

"Yes, that is the initial idea, but I wish to retain advice on whether this would be an advantageous area of investment."

Adler steepled his fingers and sat back in his chair. "When I received your father's letter on Saturday I began looking into this subject. I've had a clerk spend a day in the British Library carrying out research and, it appears that, with the increased ownership of musical instruments, demand for sheet music has also increased over the past ten years. Traditionally, music at home was accessible to the aristocracy and so publishers would only print one or two hundred copies of a manuscript. Now, with the increase in the general public playing instruments, they'll print a minimum of a thousand and sell not only in England, but all over Europe, the colonies, and the Americas," he paused for a breath. "Also, taking into consideration the popularity of music halls and concerts, music is accessible to all classes of society from the working man to the upper class. I can envisage this development continuing and therefore, I believe music publishing is a very good area of investment."

"That is excellent news. How do I go about setting up my company?"

"This is where your lawyer comes in. They will have to incorporate your new company, and when you have the required papers, I will open a new bank account in the business name, and then transfer the funds bequeathed by the late Theodore Harcourt into the account for you to draw from. Will there be other shareholders, or do you wish to be the sole owner?"

"The business proposal is still in the early stages. I will meet with my lawyer again tomorrow and write to you when I am clear on how to proceed." I rose, and offered my hand, which Adler took.

“Thank you so much for your time. I will correspond at the earliest convenience.”

GEORGE

Mr. Grayson had a case of the morbs, and so, during the Saturday show he was not his cocky, crowd-pleasing self at all. If you work in a theater, even when you're down in the dumps, every single one of us knows to paste on a fake smile and carry on. No punter would pay good coin to watch a misery-guts on stage. But Mr. Grayson was not right at all. For a start, he was on the sauce; Eloise had smelled the foul vapors of alcohol mixed with shag tobacco on his breath when he spoke to her, then she told me. I sent a worried glance to our stage manager, Arthur. He bit the bullet and spoke to Mr. Grayson, suggesting that he could take over the compering tonight. But Grayson wouldn't have it.

"Just you remember who pays your wages, Formby. I could run this place with my bloody eyes closed and don't you forget it," he'd slurred. The orchestra struck up their introduction music and then Mr. Grayson stepped on stage with a face like a wet weekend, and swayed like he was standing on the prow of a ship, before finally introducing the first act.

Mr. Grayson's black mood seemed to spread through all performers like a disease. We theater folk are a superstitious lot! A slow burning beeswax candle that we called a ghost light was always lit on stage after hours because a dark theater was bad luck. Something as simple as hearing a whistle behind the scenes would put the fear into an actor. One of the acts, a comedian named Ollie O'Brien was so annoyed about Mr. Grayson's tardy behaviour that he laid into him back stage, accusing Mr. Grayson of bringing the evil eye upon the theater. The orchestra had to play louder to cover up their roaring.

When Tommy Pickles, the juggler, was doing his act he dropped his balls, and later Sally Swift, the plate spinner, broke a plate—something I'd never seen from a professional spinner before. Eloise was then sent on early and she had to improvise for an extra minute because Mr. Grayson's lack of showmanship put the timings of the whole show out of kilter. I pulled things together by doing my character Miss Fortune, using one of the French showgirls Edith in the act as a customer who wanted her fortune told. I knew the fellows would appreciate an encore from one of the showgirls, and the skit went down well. Dressed as Miss Fortune in my shawls and head scarf I'd looked into the crystal ball and sang of Edith's fantastical future, before Miss Fortune's false eye popped out and we chased it around the stage together to much laughter. I was back on later in the night to close the show with my saucy aristocrat Lord Dickey.

After the show I joined Eloise, her Mari, and another dancer Judy Hoops, who, you guessed it, danced with hoops! We walked through the rainy streets to The Sun Tavern in Covent Garden in order to drown our sorrows. A few of the other acts sauntered in too. Scotsman Tommy Pickles was furious about dropping his balls, and the Irish comedian, O'Brien sat with us, his shoulders hunched as he seethed resentfully over his pint of stout.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I tells ya, in all my years playin' at the Middlesex I ain't never seen Grayson behave like such a selfish wee shite."

"Aye. What the hell was eatin' at him? He looked like somethin' crawled up his arse an' died," Scotsman Tommy agreed.

"I was going to give him the naggin of whisky I've got in my dressing room if he'd have let me take over as compere to liven the place up," Judy said.

"You've got a naggin of whiskey and ye didnea tell me!" Tommy said in outrage.

“I wish you had given it to ‘im,” Mari piped up, “If I wanted to be déprimée ...how you say...depressed...yes? I would have stayed in La Rochelle wiz mah crazy mozer.”

We all laughed.

“I’ll drink to that!” Eloise agreed.

“At least the punters seemed to have had a good night,” I added brightly, trying to lighten the mood. “Mr. Myrna said the takings are up.”

Mr. Cyril Myrna was all about the money. He dealt with the box office takings, making tallies and sorting out the wages before giving the remainder to Mr. Grayson to put in the safe. It baffled me that even though everyone backstage had caught the dark mood and had a bad night, the punters were still packed in like sardines and enjoyed themselves.

“Good. What the punters don’t know can’t hurt ‘em,” Eloise said. “I’d just love to know why Grayson was in such a stinker.”

I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was going on with Mr. Grayson, and I was sure it had to do with me. “We’d best keep our heads down and hope the cloud soon passes,” I said, and raised my glass for a toast,

“Up your bum!” I called, and my comrades parroted it. After tossing back our drinks we all started to laugh. Finally, the atmosphere began to shift.

“Another round?” O’Brien suggested.

When I stepped through the doorway of Browns Hotel on Tuesday my eyes searched the crowd of well-to-do patrons. Finally, across the foyer, I found Percy. His brilliant green eyes shone, and the same wide puppyish smile lit up his face. My heart banged against my ribcage with the nervous joy of seeing him again. I'd had a despondent few days after the peculiar show on Saturday night, and I figured that if Grayson hadn't come out of his maudlin mood by tomorrow, I'd go to his office and we'd have it out!

I longed to wrap Percy in my arms, but that wasn't done, not here, not ever in public. And so I moved off from the entrance, my long strides devouring the space that parted us. As I walked across the ever-so-fancy foyer I decided a hearty handshake was in order, like we were just old chums.

"Ah Percy, well met, my friend, it's so good to see you," I said enthusiastically in Lord Dickey's cultured voice, as I reach out gripping his hand and forearm with both of my hands. Our gazes locked and my innards fluttered with a burst of pleasure. How could I have forgotten the flecks of gold in his green eyes, and how adorable he looked when his cheeks pinkened with desire?

"George, my old friend. I'm so pleased you could meet with me today. Come, I've reserved a table in the restaurant, my treat!" I was glad that Percy understood the game and could improvise. But the restaurant reservation, this was a curious surprise. I'd imagined we'd take a table in the tea room and have a cuppa and a natter, maybe enjoy sandwiches or a Chelsea bun? But the restaurant at Browns was very la-de-dah! I was glad I'd worn the suit and bowler hat I used for my Lord Dickey costume as it made me look like I fitted right in!

The ma'tre-de took us to a private booth at the rear of the restaurant and I was pleased that we'd missed the lunchtime rush.

"Would you mind if I ordered for you?" Percy asked, and as this was his treat I said

“Please do!”

Percy ordered a smoked salmon starter, and then venison for main, but we agreed to drink only cordial with our meal.

“I think I’ll need to be carried home after eating all of this!” I said after the waiter left the plate of sliced roasted venison in front of me with a selection of vegetables.

“You and me both!” Percy beamed. “I forgot that they served such a large cut. Luckily, I don’t have to rush back to the office.” Our eyes met and we shared such looks of such fondness I was sure all in the restaurant knew what we were. As I had no other plans either we took our time with the large luncheon. During the meal we engaged in lively conversation about books and poetry. Percy told me about his university where he studied English. Needing to be upfront from the get-go, I admitted that I’d not had a proper, formal education.

“When I was a nipper we would travel from town to town where Ma would work as a seamstress and costumier. I started my schooling when we moved into the Middlesex. I was eleven. That was where I learned to read and write properly, words and music too,” I admitted.

Percy listened intently. He didn’t look down on me as if I was lesser because I hadn’t been to a posh school. He made me feel like I was the only person in the whole world. We’d come from vastly different backgrounds and yet, there were so many things we had in common.

I paused eating and reached for my glass of cordial. “I was wondering. Do you have any say about stories for the newspaper?” I asked before I took a sip.

“Oh goodness, no! That’s a totally different department. There’s a dedicated team of journalists, editors and illustrators for each of our publications. My father has the

final say. Why do you ask? Do you have a salacious story to tell?" he grinned and cocked a brow.

"Funny you should say that. My boss, Mr. Grayson has been behaving all kinds of funny since you and I met last Friday."

"Is that right?" Percy replied warily. I could tell that Percy was as concerned as I was about exposure.

"The serving girl, the one you asked to give the note to me...Doris. She's a right old wagon!" I sneered.

Percy reached for his glass, and appeared confused. "Wagon?" he quizzed.

"Ridden by many, if you know what I mean!"

"Oh...ohhhh!" At understanding the crude explanation Percy burst out laughing and I smiled at seeing him laugh. He had the most wonderful, lyrical laugh and it made my innards twist.

"Do go on," he said after taking a sip of his drink.

"Well, our Mr. Grayson is a married man with kiddies. Doris is his latest bit-on-the-side. She told him about the note you sent to me." I paused for a moment before admitting, "I wouldn't be surprised if she'd read it!" Percy grimaced and appeared worried at hearing the admission, but I couldn't keep it from him. The fact was he'd chosen the laziest serving girl with the loosest morals to deliver a love note to me.

"Anyway, Grayson sent her to flirt with some of the fellows at your table. They told her you were all from Harcourt's Press. Then Mr. Grayson starts behaving strange, spying on me backstage, asking questions about my private life, and acting out of

sorts. He had the nerve to come out and accuse me of selling stories to the Daily Gazette!”

“Are there any scandalous stories circulating about the Music Hall?”

“Not that I know of. That’s what I don’t get!”

“He made quite the leap then.” Percy pondered for a moment his eyes searching mine before he said, “So, he thinks I’m a journalist and not…” Our gazes held and we both smiled in shared understanding before Percy continued, “Good, good. A man who behaves in such a suspicious way, accusing staff of misdeeds where there are none, most certainly has something to hide. Usually it has something to do with money. Are your wages paid up to date?”

“Yes. Mr. Myrna does the box office receipts and accounts. He deals with the takings for each show and Grayson only gets what’s left once we’ve been paid,” I explained. “I’m Grayson’s star act and I’m lucky that I have a roof over my head to boot. Some of the other regulars don’t like that I live at the theater, but that ain’t my problem. I think you’re right, something else is going on that has Grayson all jittery, throwing unfounded accusations around.”

“He could have money trouble,” Percy suggested. “Men in financial dire straits will do the damndest things to dig themselves out of the hole.”

“If the numbers of punters are anything to go by, the Middlesex is doing well. We’re always rammed on a Friday and Saturday and get good crowds on Wednesday and Thursday too. Grayson also has a troupe of acts that travel the country, so he must have a pretty penny coming in from that as well.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s involved in other enterprises you know nothing about. Be careful George. Trust is hard won and easily lost. I’d suggest you keep an eye on

your Mr. Grayson.” Percy paused to take a sip of cordial. “Come, let’s finish up here. We’ll go for a walk to aid the digestion.” He gestured for the waiter to come to our table and asked for the bill. He paid with a crisp pound note and didn’t wait for the change. I supposed that if I socialized with a gentleman I’d best get used to such largesse.

We left the hotel and strode down Albemarle Street, just a couple of swells having a stroll together in the city. Percy was wearing a well-tailored blue frock coat, and I was in Lord Dickey’s suit with a colourful emerald cravat that made me look like quite the dandy. I paused to gaze in the windows of boutiques that sold finery to the Lords and Ladies, but no matter the tug of temptation I couldn’t justify buying a new silk cravat for Lord Dickey’s costume at these prices when the second-hand shop would do!

It was a fine afternoon, the sky was a pale powder blue, and the light breeze had a note of river stench to it, but no matter, no one, neither rich nor poor could escape the foul air in this city. I felt as light as a feather, contented to be about in the posh side of town with my very own gentleman friend. If we hadn’t arranged this luncheon, I’d have called on Eloise and gone to Regents Park for a stroll, and a penny lick. I supposed Percy would have remained at his office.

Percy and I turned onto Piccadilly and strolled together through the bustle of pedestrians in their finery. The shops lining each side of Piccadilly sold all kinds of wonderful things, from confectionary, to fine tailoring, haberdashery, tobacco, tea, and baked goods. I saw a hanging sign denoting the guild of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers . There were many such signs for guilds around the City of London if you knew to look up. This particular guild held a grip over the publishing industry and was responsible for setting and enforcing regulations. Without a word, Percy linked his arm into mine, and pulled me into the stationers below the guild sign.

Now, this shop was right up my alley. The gentleman behind the glass display counter was pole thin, suited, and he wore small round spectacles. He gave a nod to Percy.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Waterman,” Percy said in greeting.

“Ah, back so soon Mr. Harcourt. It just so happens that your order has been finished. It’s in the work room. I’ll be back in a tick,” Mr. Waterman said and then he left through a door into a back room. Percy and I shared a look of excitement and then we were off, browsing the wares and picking up the display jotters to check the quality of the bindings. I usually bought loose leaf manuscript pages in bundles of a ten, and loose blank paper was cheaper than purchasing a bound notebook. Percy’s playful gaze met mine and he beckoned me to join him as he viewed the display of the new, costly fountain pens. They were a very clever invention that kept a reservoir of ink inside the body of the pen, so you didn’t have to keep dipping into an ink pot. I gazed lustfully at the display.

“Nice aren’t they,” Percy whispered to my ear, eliciting a shiver to places that should not be mentioned in public. “It is quite a remarkable achievement. You see, the nib is made from iridium; it’s a metal, silver in appearance but much harder and denser, so it’s excellent for long-lasting nibs. The pen barrel is metal and can be clad with whatever you like, Mother of Pearl, tortoise shell, enameling, even gold or silver. And don’t get me started on the chemistry that went into the recipe for free-flowing ink. It’s a marvel.”

I shared Percy’s awe at the invention of the fountain pen and enjoyed the insight’s he’d shared. “Oh, I can only dream of owning something so beautiful,” I said, my sigh filled with longing. The fountain pens were very expensive and only for the richest of men! The rest of us were stuck with dipping pens or, my less messy preference of writing was with a Banks and Co graphite pencil.

Mr. Waterman returned minutes later carrying an ivory gift box, which he tied with a thin red ribbon and then handed the box to Percy. I supposed Percy was a regular, and he'd popped in here for new stationary before meeting me for luncheon.

"Add it to the account if you please, Mr. Waterman."

"Of course, sir."

"Are you going to purchase anything?" Percy asked me. "Oh, no, mores the pity. This is all far too rich for my purse," I said regretfully.

We left the shop with Percy carrying his box by the red ribbon. Was it rude to ask what was in the box? I was curious but I said nothing. I let Percy walk ahead of me so I could admire the rear view. I was hit then with a flash of remembrance about what a pleasure it was to kiss, bite, and lick the soft pale globes of his backside during our bed play. So distracted I was that I bumped into a gentleman. "Begging your pardon, sir," I said to the furious man before hurrying to catch up with Percy. There was strange, crackling electricity between Percy and me as we strolled. I felt a little like a puppy following its master, for here on the upper-class side of town, I was a pretender, an actor playing a role, while Percy Harcourt was the real deal.

"The day is very pleasant. Shall we take a walk in St James's Park?" Percy asked, linking my arm again. I was a little shocked at the gesture.

"Yes, why not! It's been a while since I was in this neck of the woods."

After several silent minutes of walking through the bustling crowds with Percy's arm linked in mine we stopped again, this time we were outside a confectioner's shop. We looked in the window at the displays of beautifully boxed sweets. "What's your fancy?" he asked.

I turned and pinned him with my gaze. I grinned and cocked a brow. Percy's smile sent a jolt of desire through me.

We left the confectioners shop ten minutes later with several boxes in a large paper gift bag. Percy had purchased Turkish delight for his mother, Russian toffee for his father, and chocolate truffles for himself. He also purchased an ornate gift box with lots of little drawers that contained a selection of sweet treats for me. I'd bought a quarter of barley sugar twists for myself, and a quarter of pear drops for Eloise, as they were her favourite. I felt bad that I hadn't purchased a gift for Percy, but what could the likes of me offer a man as well off as he? I would have to think of something special that only I could give him! For starters I opened the paper bag of barley sugar and offered it to Percy. He took a small orange coloured twist, popped it in his mouth, and as he sucked on it he hummed with approval. Gods, the sight of him sucking that sweet made my pego twitch. I too sucked on a barley sugar and so we were silent as we made our way across the Mall to St James's Park.

Temptation most certainly had me on a leash as I strolled along the pathways of the Royal Park with such a handsome gent. To be frank, in his company I felt rather drunk with lust and each time our hands brushed accidentally, a dart of desire coiled my innards. The floral displays of daffodils, tulips, crocuses, and snowdrops were lovely and all ages of people were enjoying the Queen's park on this glorious spring day.

"There's something I'd like to show you," Percy said cryptically before darting into a grove of trees. I didn't even ask what he meant before following Percy into the wooded area that cut us off from the park and bustling city. The woodland area was dark, and as we moved deeper into the trees the dried leaves of last autumn crunched underfoot. Percy stopped by a huge old Oak tree a couple of minutes later and he looked around warily. I stepped up to the tree trunk and leaned against it, my gaze searching his handsome face. I knew full well I'd been led here under false pretences, unless Percy wanted to show me his favourite tree. I didn't care about any tree, but

there was one particular stick I'd like to be reacquainted with! A shaft of sunlight shot through the woodland canopy lighting Percy's mop of blond curls, making him luminous. A blush of colour rose to his cheeks and his bright green eyes sparkled with affection. I smiled back mirroring his look. Percy placed the gift bag on the dry woodland floor and angled his body closer.

"I've been so very desperate to get you alone," he admitted as he lifted his fingers and tenderly stroked the back of them over my cheek. It was an intimate gesture that sent my heart fluttering and made heat travel to my nethers.

"I'd rather like to kiss you?" he said in a whispered growl. I was amused that after the blistering night of passion we'd shared he still didn't have the confidence to know what he was permitted to do, bless him.

"Did you think I'd changed my mind? I'd say we've established that I like you and you like me," I purred.

"I...I didn't want to assume," he chuckled nervously. It was totally adorable.

"Well, consider this permission to assume correctly until I tell you otherwise," I said as I leaned in and claimed his lips. Percy surprised me then by taking both of my hands, raising them above my head, and pinning them to the rough bark of the tree. My knees went weak with the rush of lust that the confident gesture elicited, and a needy little moan escaped my throat as Percy pushed his full weight against me, one leg between my own. He rutted his arousal against me, and by god, I loved it. Our tongues danced and we swapped the taste of barley sugar. I loved the tickling sensation of his moustache against my skin and I couldn't help but grind my arousal against him, riding his hip with involuntary bucking motions. Our kiss went on for what felt like ages but also, it was not long enough. There was a peal of childish laughter—much too close to us. Percy immediately pulled away, swiped up the handle of the gift bag, and with a thumb and forefinger, he smoothed the saliva from

his blond moustache. His lust drunk eyes watched as my tongue darted out to lick my swollen lips.

"Meet me on the blue bridge," he said urgently and then he vanished into the trees. I was suddenly alone, breathless, painfully aroused, and a little annoyed that the shrieking kid had scared Percy away. But I understood all too well that we could not be discovered in such intimate circumstances.

"Henry, darling. This is not funny at all. Nanny's not playing. Come out this minute or you'll get left behind," a woman called, her accent cut glass and cultured. "You know there are monsters in the woods that come out after dark," she added. It was then that a little boy of around four-years-old wearing a sailor suit of white trousers and shirt with a blue tar flap collar strolled past the tree I was still leaning against. He was dreamily trailing a stick long the ground as he walked. He turned and his shocked wide eyes found me. This was the errant child who had interrupted a bloomin' scorcher of a kiss, and so I gave him a toothy grin and a malevolent stare. He screamed, dropped the stick, and went running off in the direction of the woman calling his name. That would teach the little bugger to not run away!

I moved off then and strode through the woods in the same direction as Percy. Finally, I stepped out from the cover of trees and back onto the path. There was no one around in this area of the vast park, and so I got my bearings and walked towards the lake to locate the blue bridge.

My heart flipped when I saw Percy standing in the middle of the bridge, his upper-class silhouette displaying how finely made he was. Percy was gazing longingly out into the water where couples relaxed in rowing boats and children laughed and screamed as they ran along the bank chasing after the ducks. Percy turned and his searching gaze found me and pinned me to the spot with a lustful jolt. He sent me a puppyish grin and his eyes sparkled. I returned the smile and captured that picture of him, my lover, happy to see me, wanting me, and I saved it in my memories. I hurried

to meet him in the middle.

“Come, let’s find a bench,” Percy suggested. We walked across the bridge and then we continued on the pathway that led around the lake. We finally found an unoccupied bench and took a seat. Percy put his hand into the gift bag and pulled out the red ribboned box he’d purchased in the stationers. He handed it to me. I was tongue tied for a moment and looked up in shock, searching his luminous face.

“I bought this for you, open it,” he encouraged, his tone full of excitement and affection.

My fingers trembled as I pulled the red ribbon and eased it from around the sides of the box. Then I removed the lid, and drew back a sheet of fine white tissue paper to see that the gift box had three compartments, one held a bottle of Indian Ink, another held a bound blue leather notebook stamped with the silver gilded title: The Songbook of George Dancie, and in the third compartment was a velvet pouch that, when I opened it, I found held a gorgeous fountain pen with a tortoise shell barrel and an iridium and gold nib. While looking at the wonder of these gifts’ tears leapt to my eyes. I turned and gaped at Percy, unable to find any words to say how touched I was. I picked up the notebook and opened it to see a hand-penned quote. I read it out.

“ This book is for you to fill with songs that will be sung for a hundred years, P x”

I was moved to think of how Percy had wanted to give me something so personal, so intimate. “I...I don’t know what to say. No one’s ever given me such wonderful gifts.” And it was true. I’d never been inundated with gift boxes like Eloise. I lived vicariously through her, enjoyed her cast offs, eating her boxes of chocolates, and borrowing the rare fancy garment to add to Miss Georgette’s costumes. Unattached ladies did not wait outside the stage door for me. They occasionally sent me notes, or a rare, racy photograph but no gifts. The fellas who had an inkling of my preference would buy me a drink or two, as they thought that was a way to get me on my knees.

But I knew my worth!

“Just tell me you’ll use them,” he pleaded.

“Oh, I will no doubt. I shall copy all of the songs I’ve written into the book and use this beautiful fountain pen. It will be good to have them all in one place,” I said as I wiped the tears from my cheeks.

“How many songs have you written?” Percy asked.

“For performance, I have twenty original songs. But there are many others that I haven’t found a character for yet.”

“Will you sing for me sometime? For me alone?”

“I would gladly do it now, but I fear we’d attract a crowd.” I reached out and gripped Percy’s hand and squeezed.

“Thank you so much. I hope we can find a time and place to be alone again soon. I must confess I’m finding it painfully difficult to keep my hands off you.”

Percy sent me a boyish grin. “And I you. Did you get a letter about the event on Saturday?”

“I did and I shall inform Miss Georgette to be on her best behaviour this time! We can’t have no funny business!”

“What time do you finish working? I left early the last time and so have no idea what time the party ends at.”

“All members must be gone before two a.m. Sometimes there’s the odd straggler who

falls asleep in one of the bedrooms, so we have to carry them downstairs and pour them into their carriage. I leave with Mr. Hugo and Mr. Joshua. The coachman drops Mr. Joshua off first, then me and then Hugo. I usually get back to Covent Garden at around three in the morning.”

“Ah, the Devils Hour! Do you think it would be safe for me to wait at the stage door for you to return?”

“Harold, our doorman, stays on later when I’ve got an event, so there’s always someone in the theater. If I tell him you’re going to be arriving and give him a few bob to keep schtum, he’ll let you in and you can go up to my room and wait for me. How’s that?”

“Is he trustworthy?”

“Harold’s part of the furniture. He’s worked at the Middlesex forever and there’s nothing he ain’t seen! He knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Very well. I’d like that very much. Does Mr. Grayson not get upset when you beg off on a show night to perform at another venue?”

“It’s surprising how affable he is when he gets sent an envelope with a few notes in it, in exchange of letting me have the night off.”

“Well, it seems the person who runs Wychwood has dotted their I’s and crossed all of their t’s!” Percy laughed.

“I swear, nothing is left to chance. Whoever they are they’ve got the planning skills of Napoleon!”

“It’s a date then. I’m very much looking forward to Saturday!” Percy smiled.

As was I!

PERCY

Saturday finally arrived and at six p.m the carriage promptly pulled up outside Blackwood Hall. I informed Bentley that I would not be home tonight and if she enquired on my whereabouts, he should pass the information onto my mother. For the past week mother had taken to her bed, apparently suffering from nervous exhaustion. It was poppycock of course. Mother was in the rudest of health, but I had rejected her attempts to secure me a bride and she was embarrassed. Maybe she believed that by removing herself from society she would punish me, make me feel sympathy and then I would acquiesce to her demands. But no, I would not let my mother's 'funny turn' manipulate me into changing my mind. My mind was quite set and I knew exactly whom I wanted to court.

I travelled to Wychwood bubbling with anticipation, wondering what colour of fine gown Miss Georgette would be wearing tonight, and if she would direct her saucy looks at me as she sang. Would I be permitted a dance? I knew Mr. Joshua would have his eagle eyes on me to ensure I did not renege on my promise to abide by the house rules.

"Ah, 36, so pleased you've returned to us. Let me take your coat and hat," Mr. Joshua addressed me cordially when he opened the door. It was a quarter to eight and a group of at least fifteen gents was already in attendance. I supposed that, if this was the only place some men could be their true selves and find an outlet for their desires, they would arrive swiftly and enjoy every moment!

"Thank you, Mr. Joshua. I do hope you are well. It is good to be back." I stepped into the tiled checkerboard foyer and Joshua helped me out of my coat. The scent of

cigars, mixed with Eau de Cologne found my nostrils. A lilting voice lifted high in song made my heart stutter. The sweet sound of Miss Georgette's pulled me into the dining room and I was again impressed by the display of foods from the continent. I was rather partial to French breads and cheeses, and so I fixed a plate with a selection of foods, then poured myself a glass of claret and took a seat in the music room. As soon as Miss Georgette saw me a rush of heat near set me aflame. She was in a turquoise gown and wore a russet wig of curls piled atop her head, dressed with pearls and feathers. It was a delightful confection. She finished her song and those viewing applauded. I'd taken a seat beside three gentlemen who were also enjoying their repast. We introduced ourselves by our numbers, they were 7, 14 and the final fellow was 29. Mr. 29 told us how he adored hearing Miss Georgette sing.

"Ahh, to sit back with my eyes closed and listen to our songbird, sometimes tis a pleasure better than sex," he waxed adoringly.

Mr. 14 spoke then, "Well, if that's what you think I'd suggest that you're not doing the sex correctly!" We guffawed like schoolboys. I took a bite of bread spread with fig jam and topped with cheese, while watching Miss Georgette and her pianist Mr. Hugo in anticipation as they decided what tune to play next.

"I say Miss Georgette, would you sing, Among the Crowd I saw you ? I do love your rendition," 29 called.

"No trouble at all, sir," Georgette gave Mr. Hugo a nod and he rifled through his manuscripts to find the correct page of music. Georgette then launched into a romantic ballad about a fellow spying his secret love in a crowd, expressing his longing to be with her. By my side Mr. 29 let out a sigh of contentment and sat doe eyed enjoying the performance. I enjoyed it too, for when George sang the world faded away and all I could see was him. I realized then that I had truly lost my heart to this wonderful, mercurial actor.

As the night moved on, I spent some time in the games room, enjoying billiards with another new acquaintance whom was at least ten years my senior. He introduced himself as 12. I noticed how his eyes sparkled and he leered each time I leaned over the billiard table to take a shot. After I'd won a well fought game, he offered to gamahuche me as my prize. I was still not used to invitations of this nature and was deeply embarrassed to be approached so openly. I'd only conversed with the man for thirty minutes. I hope I managed to hide my shock at the nature of his approach. I was relieved when the fellow did not take offence when I declined the invitation. I took my leave and joined a game of Faro, which took up an enjoyable hour and even though I lost my stake, I'd had fun.

In need of refreshment once more, and wishing to be away from the unpleasant clouds of cigar smoke, I returned to the dining room where I spied Mr. Joshua.

"I say, Mr. Joshua. I wonder, could I have your permission to ask Miss Georgette to dance?"

"Sir, I am not the keeper of her virtue, or her dance card. Miss Georgette can dance with any fellow she fancies. However, do be aware that the membership is protective of our songbird. All I ask is that you do not monopolize her time."

"Understood," I nodded. Our conversation ended abruptly when there was a loud rapping on the door which took Mr. Joshua away to do his duty.

"45, welcome sir," Mr. Joshua greeted the man just as cordially as he greeted all members. I poured myself a glass of claret while the newcomer, who was, by the sounds of his gruff greeting, already well in his cups. He wrangled his way out of his greatcoat, and tossed it at Mr. Joshua. I was shocked by his appalling lack of manners. He barreled towards where I stood at the credenza laden with bottles of wine, brandy, and spirits. I collected my glass and stepped aside as the rude drunkard grabbed a bottle of red wine by the neck and, with his teeth, he removed the cork that

was half in the neck of the bottle then spat it out onto the floor, as if he were playing the part of a pirate. Goodness, I'd thought that the clientele at Wychwood were of far better breeding than this!

"Is he here yet?" the man bellowed to Mr. Joshua. The aggressive raised voice made Mr. Hugo and Miss Georgette pause their song. The silence that fell was deeply uncomfortable.

"27 has not yet arrived. Your room is ready if you would like to wait for him there."

"Yes, yes, good idea," the man said and then, with his bottle of wine in hand, he staggered through the doorway and towards the stairs walking like he was in a storm.

"Please continue songbird, let's lift the spirits, aye!" Mr. Joshua called. Miss Georgette gave Mr. Hugo a nod and he began the introduction of a very jaunty waltz. Then, to my delight, Miss Georgette began to sing in French!

It was another half an hour before I got the chance to approach her and ask for a dance.

"Miss Georgette, may I say how beautiful you look tonight. Your frock is lovely,"

"Why, thank you kind sir," she said as she fluttered her fan and flashed those autumn brown eyes at me.

"Would you care to dance?"

"After our turn at the last party, I am quite dizzy with delight that you want to take me on the floor again," Miss Georgette purred, taking my hand and leading me onto the dance floor surrounded by other gents locked in intimate clinches.

We moved off and spun in time to the waltzing melody and having George in my arms again was a joy. He leaned in and as we twirled together said,

“Hello lover, you look edible tonight.” Those words went straight to my groin and made me half hard.

“As do you! Are the arrangements in place?” I said to George’s ear.

“Yes. Go to the stage door after midnight and when you knock Harold will ask ‘Who is it?’”

“What do I reply?”

“Lord Dickey’s brother.”

We shared an amused look and then twirled our way back towards the piano. Suddenly there was an almighty roar of rage and a door upstairs slammed. The piano music stopped, and alarmed by the interruption the other dancing gents halted. Then we heard the inebriated bellowing of a man,

“Damn your eyes, boy, where the devil are you? An hour, you’ve kept me waiting for a bally hour. Joshua, where is he, where did you hide him?” It was the rude man from earlier. George and I hurried through the dining room to a commotion in the foyer to see other members watching the drunken debauchee with distaste writ large in their expressions. Mr. Joshua stepped out of his office.

“Joshua, where is he?” the brute called as he came barreling down the staircase, lost his footing, then slid down the stairs on his arse and slumped at the foot of the stairs in a heap.

“What’s happening? Are we being raided?” an effeminate voice screeched in alarm.

The drunkard was trying to pull himself up to stand by grappling with the balustrade. This kind of behaviour was not acceptable.

Mr. Joshua raised his hands and pacified,

“18, there is no need for alarm, we are quite safe. Gentlemen, apologies for the interruption please continue to enjoy your evening. Mr. Hugo, music please,” the butler added. Then he turned to the fellow who had caused the trouble.

“45, up you get sir,” he said offering his hand to pull the man to his feet. “If you would accompany me to the kitchen, I’ll make you a cup of fine Jamaican coffee, and we’ll have a little chat, aye,” Joshua then guided him down a short flight of stairs and through a doorway to the kitchen.

“Good grief. No wonder his boy never turned up if. I’d bet he was going to get pounded into next week by that drunken pig,” Miss Georgette commented. I shuddered at the thought. How awful it must be to have a disagreeable, brutish lover. I was indeed lucky to have met a gentle man, in every sense of the word, with whom I shared more than my bed preference.

GEORGE

The evening at Wychwood was unexpectedly eventful, what with one of the members becoming a boorish drunk, demanding his absent companion, and then skidding down the stairs on his arse. All fellows of our preference fear the threat of a raid, so several gents of a, shall we say, sensitive nature needed to be taken aside, given a stiff drink and calmed down before the party could continue. Mr. Joshua took the troublemaker to the kitchen where raised voices again interrupted the ballad I sang to pacify my gents. Mr. Hugo played louder to drown out the din as Mr. Joshua and 45 argued. Mr. 45 was later lead from the house to a waiting carriage and I suppose that will be the last we see of him, and good riddance!

I piled several napkins with left over pastries for my lover and I that would suffice as breakfast. I then purloined chocolates for Eloise as she'd go into an awful huff if I forgot a treat for her! It was just after three a.m. when we left. There was a peculiar tense atmosphere in the coach taking us home.

Alfonse Hugo spoke up, ending the awkward silence. "I trust that zhis 45 fellow will not return, Joshua. I have never vitnessed anything so...so...disagreeable at Vychvood. Der Herr war eine Bedrohung! "

"I agree Alfonse, he was a menace, and our members should not feel afraid while at the house. The employer will be informed and I can only recommend that 45's gold token be returned. However, it is the employer's decision as to whether this happens."

I learned then, as Hugo had absently reverted to his native tongue, that Mr. Joshua understood German. That was interesting! I knew next to nothing about the man,

except that he was the go-between who ensured we were paid well, and that all was in order during the parties.

“Some of our fellows thought we were being raided. I can’t see how any man could get a stand after that shock! I for one don’t ever wish to see the bugger again.” I added sharply. He’d interrupted the lovely dance with my secret beau and we couldn’t have a second go for fear the other members would complain of favoritism.

The coach rumbled on over cobbles as we headed into the city where freezing rain joined the fog. I was keen to get home, to release myself from this tight bodice, and to sink into the arms of my Percy.

“The matter is in hand, and I am certain it will be decided by the next event,” Mr. Joshua said with finality. That shut both Hugo me and up and the uncomfortable silence returned for the remainder of the journey.

The coachman first left Mr. Joshua on Portland Place in Westminster and then he headed for Covent Garden to drop me off. Carriages and hacks currently didn’t travel down Drury Lane at night because there was a gang on the street targeting coachmen, and word had gotten around that it was a no-go area. The police hadn’t caught the buggers yet and so I was dropped off on Kingsway. I had to scurry down the cobbles of Parker Street in the pouring rain, wearing heeled boots, while trying to hold my cloak closed. The hidden pockets were weighed down with pastries and chocolates so I failed in my attempts to keep the hem of my dress and cloak out of the puddles. I ran down the back alley and then searched in my cloak pocket for my key. Damn it! I couldn’t find the bloomin’ key. I hammered on the stage door. After a minute the raspy voice of Harold asked “Who is it?”

“It’s George. I forgot my bloody key. Let me in Harold, it’s pissing down!” The snick of a slip lock, then a second, and finally the turn of a key and the door opened. I stepped inside and shook myself like a dog.

“It’s weather for ducks out there. Did my brother arrive?” I asked in a shivery voice.

“Bruvver...yeah,” Harold smirked, “He did, at around twelve-thirty. He’s probably found your room by now!”

I hadn’t thought about the fact that Percy didn’t know the way through the warren of corridors to find the stairs to my room as we’d come in from the fire escape before. “You’re not going out in that, are you?” I asked the doorman.

“Nah, I’ve got a cot made up in my cubby, and a naggin of Gin for company. Now that you’re home I can finally get some shut eye. I’ve lit the ghost light. Of you go! Goodnight George.”

I hurried down the corridors where just one gas lamp was lit in each. I switched them off as I went as Mr. Grayson ain’t made of money, and he already grumbles about the gas bill! I was shivering worse by the time I rushed up the stairs and then down the hall to my room. When I stepped inside and closed the door I was greeted by a wall of warmth and wonderful sight. Percy had set the gas stove and so the room was deliciously warm. He was laid out on the couch wearing his trousers, no socks, and his white linen shirt hung loose with no cravat or collar. He was reading my manuscripts, and looked relaxed and, dare I say it, at home. Percy seemed to light up when he met my gaze. He then put the pages down and jumped up from the couch.

“Good lord, you’re drenched. Let me help you out of those clothes.”

“Nice to see you too!” I grinned fondly, honestly not giving a hoot that I looked like a drowned rat. Percy was here and the addition of my caring paramour made the room somehow more homely.

I untied the ribbon on my cloak and Percy eased the sodden garment off my shoulders.

“I’ve got some pastries in the inner pockets for us and some chocolates for Eloise.” I said carefully lowering the cloak into Percy’s arms. “We’ll need to ring out the cloak in the sink, and then drape it over a chair in front of the stove,” I instructed. When the cloth napkins of blessedly dry foods were removed and stored in the pantry, we worked together to ring out the velvet cloak and then draped it. Once that was done, I strode to my dressing table, lifted my sodden skirts, and sat. I untied my boot laces. My feet were aching something awful, and although these boots were of a feminine design made for a manly foot and were lovely to look at, they were a bugger to wear for hours on end.

“Here, let me do that,” Percy said as he lowered to his knees in front of me and began untying the laces. He looked up, his luminous green eyes shining. Arousal overtook me as he eased the wet turquoise satin hem of my gown up to fold over my knee, then held my right foot and continued easing the foot out of the red leather boot. He looked up and caught my eye again, a knowing smirk on his face. He surely knew exactly what this careful attention was doing to me. I reached out and brushed a blond curl away from his brow. He bit his lip as he moved to the second boot, unlacing it, and easing my foot out. I wore silk stockings that were kept in place by garters just above the knee. To my surprise Percy then gave each foot a squeeze and rub that felt even better than Eloise’s foot massage. I groaned as his thumb pressed into the arch of my right foot and my pego began to take notice.

“Come; let’s get you out of that dress, aye?”

“I’ll unpin my wig first.” Once the wig was unpinned and positioned safely on a wooden stand on my dressing table, I removed the wig cap, and then reached for the jar of cold cream. The rain had made an awful mess of my makeup. Percy stood behind me and lovingly brushed my hair so it wasn’t flattened to my scalp anymore. The feeling of him using both his fingers and the brush was deliciously comforting, and when the cold cream was on my face, I rested my head back on Percy’s abdomen and watched him in the mirror. Neither of us spoke as he cared for me, and there was

more said in our looks than words could say. After a minute I eased up and with a cloth, removed the cold cream and makeup from my face. In the mirror I was finally George again. I rose and stepped in front of the full-length mirror beside the dressing table. Without direction Percy took his place behind me, kissed my bare shoulders, and up to my nape as his eyes pinned mine in the mirror. He untied the top ribbon of the bodice and slowly pulled the ribbon through each eyelet hole, releasing me from my self-imposed bondage. I reached up my arms and stretched, inhaling to allow my lungs to fill to capacity once again. When Percy was done, I removed the bodice and then eased my turquoise silk skirt over my head. I then untied and removed the crinoline cage. Behind me, Percy gasped, “Good lord!”

I stood with nothing but red silk French knickers and stockings on. His fingertips trailed over my flesh where the bodice had left small red circle markings. They had been pressed into my skin by the metal eyelets when the ribbons were pulled tight. I turned to the mirror to see a line of marks either side of my spine.

“How long will it take for them to vanish?” Percy asked softly as he kissed each reddened circle, the brush of his soft moustache making me shudder with need.

“A...a few hours,” I whispered, and then I turned and threaded my hands around his neck. “Take me to bed, love. I’m frozen to my bones.”

“I’d wager it’s because all of your blood has flowed down here,” he said as he palmed my pego through the soft silk of my knickers. His nimble fingers on my stand sent a dart of pleasure up my spine. I threw my head back and moaned, and then I leaped up and he caught me, cradling my arse as my thighs gripped his hips. I kissed him, so hungry was I for a taste of my fella. Percy stumbled to the bed and eased me down. Then he slowly dragged the garters and stockings off. I lifted my backside so he could pull the French knickers down. I then hurriedly pulled back the covers and scrambled underneath then into the cold bed, my teeth chattering. Percy stripped and joined me, pulling me into his arms. We laid there warming the bed for a little while,

our hands roaming over soft skin and the planes of hard muscle. Gods, I so loved the feeling of this man in my arms.

“I’ve had an idea that I’d like to discuss with you,” Percy said softly. My curiosity piqued and I cocked a brow.

“I’ve been thinking about setting up a music publishing company.”

“That sounds exciting,” I said snuggling into his hairy chest.

“I wonder, how would you feel about permitting me to publish your songs?”

I pulled away and sat up. “You think my songs are that good?”

“Of course they are! The audience adores you, and I could see those songs well received all over the Empire. I’ve checked with my banker, and another music publisher, a friend of my father, who said it could be a very lucrative enterprise. I would, of course, ensure everything is above board when it comes to contracts. There would be an advance, and a royalty payment for each manuscript sold.” Percy said in a rush. He stopped talking and I didn’t respond because I couldn’t find the words.

“Sorry, I’m running ahead of myself. I’m just... rather in awe of you and your talents. We haven’t known each other long at all, and I understand you love to perform at the Middlesex. Forgive me if you have no plans to further your career in this way but I want the world to hear you sing,” he said passionately.

I reached out and placed a finger on his lips to silence him. I did want to branch out, to see the world, and make a living for myself outside of the Music Hall. The Middlesex was my training ground, but there was a big wide world out there and I wanted to see it, to travel, to sing in other theaters. With the responses I got from the punters, and from Grayson’s talk of sending me on a tour one day, I knew I could

find an audience outside of Covent Garden. But the thought of someone in say, Australia playing my songs in a music hall...well, I didn't know what to think about that. These were my song and they went with my characters. I felt protective of them. I wanted to be the one singing them and doing the entertaining.

I lay on my back looking at the ceiling. "This is all very sudden," I said. "Can I take some time to think about it? It's not that I don't trust you, I do! But our friendship is so new and it kind of scares me how much I do trust you! I think I'd like to get to know you better first, if that's alright?"

Percy mirrored me, lying flat on his back. He covered his face with his hands, "Of course, of course. I understand this proposition seems rushed, and I'm making a god-awful muddle of it,"

I turned my head to face him, "No, no, it's fine, it's just...fast," I pacified.

We watched one another for a long moment. "Thank you for believing in me though, it means a lot." I pulled Percy down with me under the covers to where it was toasty warm. I kissed him, open mouthed, hungry, and desperate. Our tongues explored, and danced, nipping and sucking until we broke apart frantic for air.

My pego was as hard as a poker, and I so desperately wanted to slide it into Percy's heat and fill him up with pleasure. I wondered if he would let me.

PERCY

I wonder, could a man die of pleasure? Because if so, I rather believed George could kill me with his hungry, all-consuming kisses. Arousal burned me, the likes of which I'd never known before. His prick was stiff as he rutted against my thigh, his fingers wrapped around my stand, tugging in time with his thrusts as he plundered my mouth. I was overwhelmed with the sensations and pulled away gasping for breath. "Gods!"

"Sorry, sorry, I'm rushing again, aren't I," he said breathlessly. I swear, when he looked at me like that I could forgive him any misdemeanor.

"I've missed you," I admitted as I struggled to catch up with my thundering heart. "Seeing you tonight as Miss Georgette and knowing you'd come home to be with me—"

"You do know I was singing each ballad to you, don't you? It was quite strange to have a beau in my mind as I sang them; it made the words feel more...real, you know?"

"Yes, I understand. I've read the romantic poets for years, and I'd thought I understood what they were trying to convey about intimacy. Yet nothing they wrote compares to how you make me feel, here," I placed my hand on my heart.

"How do I make you feel?" George asked in an intimate whisper, running his fingers over the soft pelt of my chest hair.

I thought about it, of how I became the best version of myself for George, and that I

now knew what it felt like to be in the thrall of another.

“It is difficult to be so candid,” I began, because making myself vulnerable to another was a new experience. “Sometimes you say something or look at me just so and it takes all thought, and all words from me. My mind is a fizz and I cannot breathe properly until you’re in my arms, and then, when you are, I’m finally at peace. I suppose it sounds similar to the descriptions of addiction I’ve read about,” I chuckled.

“Goodness!” George gasped. “I ain’t ever had anyone speak so passionately about me. I wished for a fellow who would. But I didn’t think it was possible, not for the likes of me,” he admitted self depreciatingly. George fingered my blond curls behind my ears, and then he cupped my face and I rose to meet his lips. The soft, tender kisses swiftly became desperate and hungry again, as if we two could not get enough of one another. I pulled back and, in a lust-roughened voice said,

“I want you to do it, be my first.”

“What do you want me to do, Percy? I need you to say the words love.”

This was interminable, but I was so very desperate to be claimed by this wonderful man. “I...I want you to bugger me, George. You know how it’s done, yes?”

“I do, I know how it’s done, and I’ve done it to a few fellows. I’ll be gentle.”

“Then, yes, I want you to fuck me.” I said decisively.

George ran a hand over my backside and squeezed. “Are you clean...down there?”

“Oh, yes, yes, I was thinking about it...planning. I bathed before I left the house.”

“Good. Now, roll on to your belly and stick your arse up. I have to prepare you first;

cos there ain't no way my pego is fitting in your tight little hole without a bit of help!"

I was embarrassed by the candid nature of his instruction. I turned over and did as directed, burying my face in the pillow to hide my mortification. George tossed the blankets back and scooted behind, trailing his fingers down my back as he went. He positioned himself between my legs and in a slow exploration, ran his hands over my lower back, buttocks, and the backs of my thighs. He then placed gentle, soft kisses down my spine, each one making me gasp, squirm, and my prick twitch. George finally arrived at my backside, and his teasing fingers pulled my cheeks apart. I couldn't believe I trusted another man enough to even look at my fundament, let alone...

Ohhhhh!

I pushed my face further into the pillow for George was touching a deeply intimate part of my body, a place that I had not even seen, let alone gained pleasure from. I was unsure if what we were about to do would even be pleasurable. Wasn't sodomy about submission? I'd heard it joked about in such away—that there was an aggressor and a submissive. If I had to submit, I wanted to experience it with George. I trusted George. A sudden tickling sensation at my entrance made me lift my head and whimper, "Whu...what's that?"

"Just my finger swirling round and round to relax your pucker. How does it feel?"

The sensation was exquisite, and surprising. I let out a moan.

"I'm going to taste you now," George explained, but my senses were discombobulated.

"P...pardon?" My voice sounded drunk to my own ears. And then wet warmth licked

up my crease, over my fundament and my limbs failed me. I melted into the bed and exhaled a groan of delight.

“That good, aye?”

“Gods, George, please...do that again!” I begged, and he did, prizing my cheeks apart and lathing me with his hot, moist tongue. Thoughts whited out and I squirmed, swimming in pleasure the likes of which I never knew I was capable of. George continued licking and sucking at my fundament, moaning his own pleasure to vibrate against my most sensitive, intimate area. The bliss so intense all I could do was lay there and submit to it.

After several minutes of George’s clever tongue, he pulled away and then I felt his weight leave the bed. I was too far gone to even move my head to ask why he’d left. I heard a draw slide open, and then close, and then the pop of a cork. George returned to the bed and then I felt another new sensation at the entrance to my body.

“This is oil of olive. It’ll make things easier, y’know, like greasing a piston.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that!” What followed was the snick, snick sound of George rubbing the oil onto his stand, and then I felt a slick finger at my fundament, rubbing oil on me. I came to full awareness when George tapped his crown against my crease then began rubbing it up and down. I gritted my teeth as I anticipated the pain when he pushed in.

“I’m gonna to go slow, don’t clench, ease back onto it so we get past your ring,” he directed.

George rubbed his crown up and down my oiled crease again, it felt divine, and then there was pressure at my entrance. The discomfort was worse as he pushed forth. I told myself wanted this, I wanted to please my beau, but by god, it hurt like the

blazes, as bad as I'd imagined. I cried out, pushed back and suddenly after a burning sensation I was full...of George. We were connected, as one under God.

"Easy there, love, breathe, take your time, and tell me when to move."

I wanted the intrusion gone and the words to tell him this were on the tip of my tongue, but involuntarily my hips moved, easing his prick deeper inside me. It touched something, a place inside me that sent a flood of pleasure and need through me.

"Move, please, gods, move, damn you!" I exclaimed, and George did, pulling his prick nearly all the way out and then sinking back down to hit that pleasure point. He did it again and again. I cried out with the bliss of it as my darling George undid me thrust by thrust.

George lay atop me and pounded his pego inside, grunting with the effort.

"You okay love?" he asked at my ear.

I turned my head and gave him a soppy grin. "Never better. I can't get you deep enough. Now fuck me!"

George snickered and we kissed then. It was messy, all tongue and teeth with no finesse. I eased my hips up to meet each downward thrust and we soared together, my prick throbbing as it rubbed between the bed sheet and my abdomen. All too soon George cried out in his crisis and filled me with his hot spend. My own climax came on just as intensely, my untouched prick spurting once, twice; three times until every drop of semen I had oozed out of me. The feeling of George's spill inside my body was strangely intimate, and I wanted to keep his prick there, locked inside my back passage like a dog waiting for his bollocks to empty. But alas, as soon as his prick started to soften, he eased out and rolled over flopping on the bed beside me. He

turned his lust drunk gaze on me and grinned wolfishly.

“That was fun...for me anyways. How was it for you?”

“I think you might have killed me. I can’t move, even though I’m lying in my own mess and I have yours seeping from my rear,” I chuckled, still riding on the wave of euphoria our love making had produced.

“I’ll clean you up love, don’t fret.”

That was the second time George had called me love . Was it a turn of phrase, or did George’s feelings go deeper than lust? I hoped so, because, after what we’d just done, I was sure my feelings did.

GEORGE

We ignored the church bells that rang out from the actor's church of St Paul's in Covent Garden, and instead we spent a lazy Sunday in bed. My beau and I breakfasted on the leftover pastries I'd brought from Wychwood, and for lunch I made us egg on toast, as it was one of the few things I could cook! Percy then took me out to dinner in Chinatown and we indulged in the most delicious oriental meal I'd ever tasted. On the way home we stopped at the Punch and Judy pub for a pint, and no surprise, Eloise and her Mari were tucked in a corner enjoying a drink. I gave her a wave and she beckoned us over. And so, we pushed through the crowd and joined them.

"Percy's setting up a music manuscript publisher and he wants to publish my songs!" I revealed excitedly to the girls after we'd downed our first drink. Eloise gave Percy one of her looks.

"It's all perfectly above board, I assure you," Percy said to pacify her. "There will be proper contracts, annual royalty payments, and George will do well out of the publishing rights well into his dotage."

"Hmmm, that all sounds nice, but I swear if you take my boy for a fool, you'll have me to answer to, you hear!" Eloise scowled. Percy held his hands up in surrender.

"I promise, I have nothing but George's best interest at heart."

It turned out to be a lark of an evening, and when Percy went to the bar to get another round Eloise leaned in and said, "He's smitten with you and no mistake."

“You think?”

“Can’t you tell? I ain’t never seen you so at ease with a fellow. Remember that cove last summer, what was his name?”

“Archie,” I groaned.

“Yeah, that’s him. He was all over you like a rash, and you did your best to keep him at arm’s length, until you got so sick of his attention you took him to an alley just to shut him up.”

Oh, I remembered Archie alright. He was big and muscly, and he stank of meaty sweat and tobacco. He’d gone to his knees and begged like a dog. I’d gripped onto his hair and shoved my pego down his throat as the means of shutting him up, and when he’d had his fill, he took every drop, licked his lips and I never saw him again. Percy was totally different; he was so far removed from my earlier dalliances when I had no idea about love. My Percy was another country.

“Does he make you happy?” Eloise asked and honestly, I didn’t even have the words, I just smiled the dopiest grin and she ruffled my hair.

“Good, now what are you gonna do about this business proposal? Your songs could be a money spinner and set you up for life!”

“I should talk to Mr. Grayson. After all, he’s the one who’s encouraged me to write more, and he gave me my break. I’d have been on the streets if it weren’t for him.”

“True, but don’t you forget your worth love! Grayson ain’t running a charity. He keeps you around cos it suits him. You bring in the punters, who bring in the dosh. You’ve made him a pretty packet these last few years. The scales look pretty equal to me. They’re your songs, George, and don’t you forget it. You owe him nothing, you

hear?” Eloise said passionately.

Percy returned to the table carrying a tray with two pints of stout for the ladies and two pints of cider for us. I mulled over what Eloise had said, and yes, she was right. I was Mr. Grayson’s star act. I’d earned every penny I’d made at the Middlesex and more besides because I had admirers who came back every week just to see me. And so, in that case Mr. Grayson shouldn’t have a problem with Percy’s new company printing my songs.

I’d had to wait until Tuesday to speak with Mr. Grayson. Things still weren’t right between us, through no fault of mine, I can assure you. I couldn’t fathom what I’d done to deserve his resentful glares and silent treatment. What I’d said about Doris was a fact; she was lazy, nosy fussock, and she’d go with any fellow who looked her way. If Mr. Grayson had gone into a huff cos I knew he was using her as a spy backstage, then to hell with him. Percy’s new business enterprise sounded exciting and I was happy to be asked to sign my songs with him for publication. It would be a step in the right direction for my career and the royalty payments would give me choices. I supposed I’d been cocooned at the Middlesex for too long, and spending time with Percy had opened my eyes. I was ready to change; the songbird was ready to fly the nest. I would get my own place, away from the music hall.

I was standing outside Mr. Grayson’s office door. I knocked and waited nervously for a response. After a minute I knocked again.

“WHAT?” Grayson barked.

“It’s eh...George. Can we have a chat, Mr. Grayson sir,” I said sheepishly to the closed door.

“Can’t it wait, Dancie? I’m a busy man!”

It had taken me ages to pluck up the courage to even knock, but I’d done it and I needed to have this out now, once and for all.

“No, it can’t wait, it’s important,” I insisted.

“Come in then,” Mr. Grayson groaned reluctantly. I opened the door and stepped into his stinking office. It was daytime, and yet the office was dark, with just one gas scone lit on the wall. It was enough to throw light over Grayson’s large oak desk. It didn’t look like any paperwork had been filed in the cabinets since his last secretary, Millicent walked out nine months ago.

“Now, what’s so bloody urgent that you had to interrupt me from lookin’ at the books?”

I’d never been this nervous talking to Grayson, but the offer from Percy meant the world to me.

“Look, I know you have your suspicions cos of what Doris told you about the meeting with the gentleman from Harcourt’s, but it ain’t what you think,” I began courageously. Grayson placed his dipping pen down and settled back in his chair, observing me through dull beady eyes.

“He wasn’t a journalist, and I weren’t selling stories to him. He is a publisher though, and he wants to sign the rights to print my songs and music. Seeing as my songs are my own, their ain’t any trouble with doing it. I just wanted to let you know it’s happening...out of courtesy.” Grayson’s expression changed at hearing that. I held my hands up in a calming gesture.

“It could be good for the both of us, Mr. Grayson. You said that there could be a tour

for my act, and if punters would buy the song sheets after so they could play them on the piano at home, that would be more money coming in.”

Mr. Grayson was silent for a moment longer before he rose from his chair and walked around the desk to face me.

“Have you lost your bleedin’ mind, boy? You ain’t doing no deals with any publisher,” he exclaimed. He poked his tobacco stained finger at me. “Don’t you realize I own you George Dancie?” he spat those words with such cruel malevolence I involuntarily took a step back.

“Did you really think I let you stay here out of the goodness of my heart?” he mocked. “Your mum was a good enough tumble, god rest her soul, but you boy, as soon as I heard you sing, I knew you were my big ticket.”

Did Mr. Grayson let Violette stay because they’d had an arrangement? Could he actually be...my father? I shuddered. No, that could not be. I looked nothing like the greasy bag of bones in front of me.

Grayson pointed his skinny finger at me and wagged it. “And don’t look at me like that George Dancie. I know what you’re thinking. No, I ain’t your sire. I got two brats of my own and they’re more than enough. You can’t pin that on me! You’ve got a, shall we say...benefactor...yes. A fellow who’s made sure you kept a roof over your head. And while I ain’t responsible for you, I am your boss, and you’d be nothing without me. Don’t you forget that! You’re my big ticket, lad and everything you’ve made here belongs to me, you hear!”

I was discombobulated for a moment and distracted from what I needed to say. “What do ya mean, a benefactor made sure I keep a roof over my head? I remember, clear as day, after ma passed you told me I won’t see Violet’s boy on the streets .”

“And, ain’t that the truth? I didn’t put you on the streets. Why? Did you think I... cared about you like you was me own boy?” Grayson laughed and it was an ugly, hateful sound.

“Use your loaf, George, ain’t no one in this city lives for free!” Mr. Grayson shook his head as he walked back around the desk to his chair.

I was confused, and horrified to realize how guileless and naïve I’d been. In my innocence I’d taken all Mr. Grayson had told me over the years at face value. But everything I’d believed about my situation was wrong. I wasn’t living at the Middlesex for free, or because of a kind hearted gesture on Mr. Grayson’s part, because he cared for my mother and me. No, I had a benefactor somewhere, and he’d paid for me to live at the theater and learn my trade. Who the hell was this fellow?

Mr. Grayson slumped into his chair and wagged his boney finger again as he barked. “You tell that publisher to sling his hook. He ain’t poaching you. You’re mine George Dancie and I won’t hear another word on the matter. Now, piss off and let me get on!” he said finally and then he flicked a hand to shoo me away like I was a pesky fly.

Stunned, I automatically did as I was told. I turned and walked out of Grayson’s office. I kept walking through the warren of stygian hallways until I got to the dressing room I shared with Lou. We were supposed to be rehearsing a new number together, where she’d dress as the gentleman, and I was the lady he’s trying to court. The door was ajar so I knew Eloise wasn’t in her smalls. I barged in and saw Eloise had been trying on spectacles and a moustache for her character. I slumped on the chaise longue and put my hands over my face.

“Didn’t go well then?” she sighed, and I groaned in response.

“I’ve got a bleedin’ benefactor!” I exclaimed.

“Eh, what?”

“There was I thinking Mr. Grayson let me stay upstairs out of kindness, when what’s really going on is someone’s been paying him to let me stay here!”

Eloise turned away from the mirror, her fake moustache askew, “You’re havin’ a laugh!”

“True as day, that’s what he said. And he also said I have to tell Percy to sling his hook and every song I write here belongs to him.”

“That can’t be right. Did you ever sign a contract and agree your terms of employment?”

“What, no, I didn’t sign nothing. He never asked me to. It’s like I’m just part of the furniture, you know, just like Harold! Did you sign a contract?”

“Course I did, everyone here has a theatrical agent to negotiate terms. I’m guaranteed at least one spot per show for the next year. I’m paid a set wage for each performance and I have two days off each week.”

My god, I was as dense as a bag of hammers. Why did I even think I’d survive outside of the Middlesex when I knew nothing of the legalities of show business? I’d never worked in another theater, so I hadn’t needed an agent to get me work.

“I got some advice from a lawyer my Pa used to drink with,” Eloise explained. “He looked through the contract Mr. Grayson offered me and negotiated with him for me.” Eloise pulled off the spectacles and moustache. “Gods, I just knew the bastard had to be up to something skeevy.” She strode over to the chaise and sat beside me.

“Think about it George. What’s he hiding? Why would Grayson get upset about you

meeting with a publisher? Why does he think he owns everything you do here?"

My mind was whirring but I couldn't fathom what Eloise was alluding to.

"Have you ever published your songs before, George?"

"Course I ain't. They're mine," I said, bewildered. "I keep the original score but write out a few copies of the music for the orchestra, for the separate instruments, that's it. I've never published nothin'. That's why Percy wants to look after my songs and see it done right."

"Come here," Eloise said as stern as I'd ever heard her. I followed her from our dressing room and down the hallway towards the stage, but then she diverted to the door that lead to the auditorium. The round tables were folded up, and pushed to the side, and the chairs were moved to the outskirts of the vast hall. A large swathe of canvas covered the middle of the floor and the chandelier was down, ready for cleaning. But bright sunlight poured in through the glass windows and doors in the foyer. It bounced off the crystals of the chandelier and sent rainbows around the room. Eloise headed for the orchestra pit in front of the stage. She leaped the small divide, and then I heard the rustle of paper.

"Here," she thrust a manuscript at me.

"I noticed when I was talking to Jerome about the piano accompaniment for my next dance. He had this on top of his piano." I took the page from her and held it out to the sunlight. It was the manuscript with the piano music for the song I wrote for my character Dixie Normus, titled "My Cowboy's Gun." I brought it closer to see that, in smaller type below the title it said, 'Words and Music by Alfred Grayson'.

"What the bloody hell is this?" I cried in horror.

“Did he pay you? Did you give him permission to publish your songs and take the credit?”

“What? No, no, course I didn’t. I’d have told you if I had. And I ain’t seen an extra penny from him for publishing. What...what the hell is this?” The page shook in my hands. I was outraged and disgusted by this betrayal.

"Oh, there’s more. Look, he’s listed as the composer on all of these songs,” Eloise said, holding up a bundle of manuscripts she’d collected. “Grayson kept you as his star act cos he’s had a little scam on the side."

I was dumbfounded. My songs were part of me and he stole them and made money from them right under my nose. My chest felt tight and I couldn’t breathe. I eased onto the floor, sat with my legs crossed as I stared at the printed manuscript with some other bugger’s name claiming it was their work, when it most certainly was not.

“What should I do? I don’t know what to do?” I said miserably.

Eloise hopped back over from the orchestra pit into the auditorium. She sat beside me and pulled me into a side hug. “It ain’t right love, and we can’t let the bastard get away with it. You need help from someone with a good head on their shoulders. Someone who has a lawyer at his beck and call, and I know just the gentleman who can help you!”

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:00 pm

PERCY

Father and I were relaxing in the drawing room on a sunny spring afternoon, both of us reading a copy of the latest edition of *The Daily Gazette*. Mother had gone to our house in the country and so Blackwood Hall was distinctly peaceful. She was so disgusted that I had denied her a society wedding that she could not bear to be in the same room. Oh well, this was not the first time we had experienced the silent treatment. She would of course return in a month and all would be forgotten! The peace and quiet worked well for both father and I. Father was constantly exhausted due to the mountain of his new responsibilities, and I had my head in the clouds most of the time, dreaming of George, scribbling in my book of poetry as lines of inspiration came to me. A knock at the door pulled my attention from the newspaper.

“Come in Bentley.” The door opened

“Mr. Percival sir, there is a—” he paused and pursed his lips. ”—young lady at the door. She wishes to speak with you,”

“I...I beg your pardon?” I said alarmed. My father let out a hearty laugh, “Has one of your dalliances discovered where you live? You rogue,” he guffawed.

“Tell me about the young lady, did she give a name?”

“She’s French, sir.”

“I say!” My father cocked a curious brow.

“A Miss Georgette D’Ancie, and her ladies companion,” Bentley revealed.

I sat erect, a little alarmed that George had come to my home...and he was disguised as Miss Georgette too. What the devil was going on?

“Show them in, Bentley, and ask cook to provide tea and sandwiches.”

I looked across at my father, who wore a Cheshire cat smile. I met his gaze with wide beseeching eyes and I sighed, “Please, do not tell mother!” Father held his hands up in surrender.

“Nothing to do with me, my boy. I shall greet the young ladies and then take my leave!” he said, an amused twinkle in his eyes. I folded the newspaper and placed it in the rack beside the couch. Then I rose and began to pace, wondering where I could position myself to give the most handsome first impression. Afternoon sunlight was streaming through the glass double doors that led out onto the veranda. I ran my hands through my curls, straightened my burgundy frock coat, and stood with my hands behind my back in a studious pose, looking out into the bountiful garden full of spring blooms. A knock, the door opened and then I heard Bentley say,

“Miss Georgette D’Ancie, and her companion Miss Eloise.”

I turned and my eyes affixed on the vision before me. Miss Georgette looked rather demure. She was wearing a Robin’s egg blue day dress, with a shawl. She appeared very feminine, proper, and decent.

“Hello my dear,” I said unable to disguise my pleasure at having George in my family home.

“Bonjour Monsieur Harcourt, please forgive me for calling on you at such uh—” She paused and looked as if she was confused. “Sorry, you know my English is not so

good.” She waited a second before her expression brightened. “—Short notice, yes, forgive me for arriving at such short notice,” Georgette beamed. And I must admit her sultry French accent was making my bawsacks ache. I would have to ask George to speak French to me when we arranged our next tryst.

Taking in the lovely vision I strode towards her. Eloise was standing to Georgette’s left. I’d learned from our evenings at the pub that she was a tricky kind of girl who loved a prank. I could see she was trying very hard to act like the lady’s companion she was supposed to be, and not giggle. I took Miss Georgette’s lace gloved hand and kissed the back.

“It’s such a delight to see you again Miss D’Ancie. Let me introduce you to my father, Mr. Victor Harcourt.” On cue, father rose from his couch, folded the newspaper, and wedged it under his arm. He stepped forward and took Georgette’s hand and bowed a little as he kissed it.

“Charmed my dear, charmed. Please, call me Victor,” he said with a foxy grin, the suave old dog that he was!

“It is a pleasure to meet you Victor. You have a handsome son, and I like him very much.”

I let out a laugh that sounded a little hysterical. Father turned and beamed at me, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“That is good to know! His mother would agree! Our Percy is quite the catch!”

I sent father a dagger stare, and he took the hint.

“But I’m afraid; I have some work to do, so regretfully I must take my leave. I do hope to see you again my dear. I’m sure my wife Evangeline would be very pleased

to take tea with you when she returns from the country.” Father then bowed and left the room, and if I wasn’t mistaken there was a spring in his step! If only he knew! I closed the door behind him and put my ear to the honeyed timber and listened as his footsteps faded. Then I turned to George and Eloise and in unison they burst out into peals of laughter. Eloise threw herself down on one of the two large couches and between giggles said,

“Your Pa’s quite the looker for an old geezer! I near swallowed my tongue when he looked my way. But it was the way he eyed the two o’ you,” she chuckled, “He’s sure you’re the perfect match! I bet he’s gone to start the wedding invitation list!”

I ignored the playful minx and turned to George. “Much as it’s truly wonderful to see you, what’s going on? Why are you here?”

George sat on the couch opposite Eloise and I sat beside him. Eloise spoke first, “Well, yeah, jokes aside. We need your help Percy. Our boss, Mr. Grayson’s gone and stolen George’s songs, he’s printed them, and said he wrote them himself.”

“Good lord, what was a scandalous accusation!” But before I could continue a maid knocked and then entered pushing a trolley with tea, sandwiches, and fancies upon it. Silence fell while the girl set up the tea service and plates, on the table between the two couches and then left us alone. As soon as the door closed Eloise lurched off the couch and was piling sandwiches and cakes on her plate like someone was going to steal them from her.

“There’s no rush, Eloise, you can have as much as you want,” I said.

“Lou’s got a sweet tooth,” George informed.

“Yeah, and I eat everything I can get me hands on when I’m on me monthly,” she explained. I was confused for a moment. Monthly what? Then a realization hit and I

was horrified by the outrageous nature of the comment.

“Women’s business should remain between women!” I scolded, and Eloise just laughed at my discomfiture. I hurriedly poured tea for us all, and then sat back.

“Now, please, from the beginning George,” I said testily.

I’d sipped my tea and listened to a tale that boiled my blood. This Alfred Grayson fellow was a scoundrel of the lowest order. And I was stunned to hear that a mysterious benefactor had ensured George remained living at the theater. It was a very strange business indeed. Clearly, it was beneficial for George to not only have a home, but a profession where he thrived. And my God, how he had thrived. I supposed we should be grateful for the benefactor’s intervention and financial aid because the reality was that George’s situation would have been so much worse when his mother passed away if not for this act of charity.

“So, will you help him?” Eloise asked before stuffing another finger sandwich into her mouth.

“Of course I will. This is an outrage, a blatant, egregious theft. You shall have the weight of Harcourt’s legal department behind you,” I said in passionately fury. “After all, the fellows you performed for the night we met again are lawyers.”

“I beg your pardon?” George spluttered, and then put his teacup down.

“The party of men that night...it was a bachelor’s party. The fellow getting married is one of our law clerks and the rest of the party was mostly from the legal department. My company lawyer, Oliver Simmons is assisting with the contractual requirements for my new publishing business. He told me that for copyright a song must be performed publicly. The whole party bore witness to your performance that night.”

“I didn’t know that, about your party or the requirement for public performance,” George admitted meekly.

“Don’t worry; we shall meet with my good fellow Simmons. He can advise on how to deal with this Alfred Grayson.”

Eloise reached down and picked up the large carpet bag. She opened it and drew out a stack of papers which she handed to me. I looked down at the pile of musical manuscripts.

“Well, you’d best give him these then! George bought them at a music shop near Temple Bar. They’re all his songs, every last one of them. I was there when he wrote some of them and we practiced them together on the piano in his room,” she revealed.

I rifled through the manuscripts and they were indeed for the songs George had sung on stage. I recalled the pages of manuscript notes and lyrics that were strewn on the couch and steamer trunk in his room at the Middlesex.

“Are you planning on going back to the theater?” I was concerned that this Grayson fellow had something else up his sleeve, what with the reportedly troubling recent behaviour.

“Of course. It’s my home. I’ve got nowhere else to go,” George insisted. “And my mysterious benefactor paid up for that room.”

“If you don’t want to stay there and keep bumping into Grayson, you don’t have to. You can stay at mine if you want,” Eloise offered. “It’ll be a bit cramped, but we’ll make do.”

“Hmmm...I suppose that if you move out now he’s sure to realize you’ve cottoned on to his scam. I suggest you go back and continue on as if nothing has happened. But

once Simmons has advised on the legal way forward you may have to move in a hurry. So start packing discretely. I don't think your employer will be best pleased to receive a summons."

George's shoulders slumped and he looked so thoroughly dejected. "Pack to move where? I can't sleep on Lou's floor. I've nowhere else to go, Percy. And what about my job, I love that job, what if I can't perform anymore, what if Grayson spreads rumors and blacklists me?" Oh dear. Anxiety was getting the better of my dearest.

"Don't worry, all will be well." I insisted. "I have an apartment if you need to move quickly. The Middlesex is not the world,"

"It's my world, it's all I've ever known," George pleaded. I could understand how difficult change would be as he'd lived in the same room since he was eleven. But George was not a child anymore. He was a kind, beautiful, talented man of twenty-five.

"Let me show you the rest of the world, George. It would be my honour and pleasure," I smiled, and reached for his hand, unable to hide my deep affection for him.

"Eh! Where's the latrine? You two need a moment alone," Eloise decided having finished her plate of sandwiches and cakes. For such a slight, wispy girl she could certainly pack the food away!

"It's down the hall, the third door on your left," I directed. Eloise left us and I reached for a napkin. I looked into George's beautiful whisky eyes as I held his chin up with a finger. Then I wiped the crimson from his lips.

"What did you do that for?" he asked, a little annoyed.

“So that I could do this,” I said as I pressed my lips to his. George opened his mouth sighing his relief into me as our kiss took on a life of its own. I laid him back on my mother’s couch, the couch where she would sit while having her Guardians of the Poor meetings with her devout, prickly ladies. I plundered my lover’s whimpering, hungry mouth, loving how he writhed beneath me, until there was a gentle knock. I was glad Eloise was courteous enough to knock. I pulled back seeing that I’d made quite the mess of Miss Georgette’s make up. George’s gaze was lust drunk and he couldn’t stop grinning. I mirrored his grin as I righted myself. Pacified, George sat up too.

“Come,” I called and Eloise entered with a wicked smirk as she set her eyes on us.

“Good grief. It’s lucky I’ve got powder and lip paint in my bag. We can’t have you leave looking like you’ve been ravaged,” she said with a chuckle, and I was quite relieved she’d come prepared!

GEORGE

I did as Percy suggested and returned to the Middlesex on Tuesday night. Eloise and I had the Wednesday evening show to focus on where we would debut the new song. Wednesday was always our set day to test out new songs, and so the orchestra would be in early. I'd written copies of the new manuscript for each member of our orchestra and the conductor. They would run through the music a time or two to iron out any problems before Eloise and I rehearsed our skit.

We were doing a full costume rehearsal, without make-up. Eloise's costume was of a gent's suit, and mine, a pink summer dress.

"So, how did your meeting with Percy's lawyer go?" Eloise asked conversationally as I entered the dressing room and closed the door behind me. Lou eyed herself in the mirror while smoothing the wig of dark gentleman's hair required for her character. The look of her made me smile, and I was sure the punters would enjoy it too.

"It went well, I think. We've got a plan!" I relayed cryptically as I began to undress.

"Come on then, spill!"

"Well. I'd say things are about to get a little awkward for our Mr. Grayson," I brightened. "Percy's lawyer, Mr. Simmons said that they have an inquiry agent they use for settling unpaid accounts. On Percy's order, he employed this fellow to look into Grayson's dealings. And depending on the outcome of the investigations, they said Grayson could be looking at criminal charges."

Eloise gasped. “Really! Could he go to jail?”

“I dunno if it will go that far. But what he’s done, stealing my songs, Mr. Simmons said that’s illegal. He said that we need to find out about Grayson’s business dealings before we’ve got enough evidence to take it to Bow Street. The enquiry agent is to visit music shops in town to find out which ones are selling my songs. Mr. Simmons said that from the sale price of each manuscript and sales numbers they’ll be able to estimate how much money he’s made from his scam.” I stepped into the crinoline cage and tied the ribbons at my waist.

“Good—wonder how long it’ll take that vazey ratbag to have your new song printed with his own name as writer?” she said venomously as she affixed her prop spectacles.

“Mr. Simmons is coming to the show tonight. He said that the song has to be performed in front of an audience and then he’ll add a signature to witness my original copy of the score to make it all legal and such. All of the copies I made for the orchestra have been discretely named and numbered, and so when the curtain comes down tonight we’ll check which copy he’s stolen.”

“Oh, very clever,” Lou praised as she clipped on a pair of colourful braces to hold up her trousers.

“You know Sid, from the Sun Tavern?” I asked casually as I pulled the pink day dress for the character of Miss Adeline over my head.

“Yeah, he’s a good sort, looks out for me and the girls when we leave the pub late. Why?”

“Grayson uses Pittman’s printers for the posters and playbills, but the manuscripts that he had printed don’t have a printer’s name. I want to find out where he’s getting

them made. Sid's going to follow him tonight and tell me where he goes."

"Well, you are quite the little schemer George Dancie. I'm impressed," Eloise snickered. "He's acting like a guilty man who knows he's guilty."

And Eloise wasn't wrong.

After our rehearsal I was approached by a stage hand and told that Mr. Grayson wanted to see me in his office. The last time I was in the boss's office he was vile, and told me in no uncertain terms that he owned everything I made. And so I trembled with anxiety as I made my way down the low lit corridors to where his office was located. Percy had suggested I try to keep my game face on if I met with my boss alone, and he was right. I couldn't alert Grayson to the fact I knew he was a scoundrel.

I stood at the open doorway to the office, and on hearing my knock, Mr. Grayson looked up, grinned and then he rose from behind his desk to greet me.

"Come in Georgie, come in, take a load off. Would you like a cuppa?" Grayson wheedled with unusual, quite frankly, alarming courtesy. Then he hollered, "Doris, oi, bring in a fresh pot of tea and two cups." He re-took his seat behind the now cleared desk. I had no idea what had become of the piles of paperwork and ledgers, but the oak desk was finally clean. It had seen a drop of wax polish too and was buffed up to a good shine. Maybe Doris was the new secretary, and I guess that couldn't hurt if the place got a tidy!

"What's this about sir?" I asked, not feeling at all comfortable with Mr. Grayson's unsettling mood swings.

He sat back and considered me for a long moment before saying, "You know you're my best boy, Georgie. And fairs fair, things have gotten...a little tricky between us in

recent times. Now, I'll admit, I ain't been my best self for a while and being a god fearin' fella I'm willing to make amends."

I didn't know what to say to that strange, candid admission and so I said nothing.

"I promised last year that I'd arrange a tour for your act, and I didn't follow through. Well, things have changed. I've just had lunch with Bob Dukes, my tour manager, and I've decided we're going to send you on tour of England my lad. How does that sound?"

"Oh!" Ordinarily I would have been taken aback, delighted and buzzing with excitement at such an opportunity to travel and perform to new audiences all over the country. I couldn't recall all of the places we'd lived when I was a nipper. I'd been out of London a handful of times as an adult but not enough to curb my curiosity. I wanted to go to the seaside, and to the Lake District, which I'd heard took one's breath away with its beauty. I wanted to see other theaters and tread the boards on stages new to me. I wanted to cross the English Channel and go to Paris to where I might still have some family. There was so much of the world to see, however, I knew in this instance a wicked manipulation was at play. Mr. Grayson had offered me my dream on a plate after weeks of strange behaviour. Did he expect me to forget the spying, the mood swings, and the adamant claim that everything I did at the Middlesex belonged to him? I didn't trust it, not one bit.

"We'll book dates for Brighton, Oxford, Cambridge, Ipswich, Manchester, Liverpool, and York for starters, a week in each to showcase your considerable talents. How does that sound? If all goes to plan, we can get you on the coach to Brighton by next week. I can make a fuss in the press about next week being your final week at the Middlesex before you go on a grand, national tour," he said smiling with satisfaction.

Did he think I'd floated down the Thames in a bubble? I'm no fool, but this blaggard had fooled me once. That was one time too many, and he wouldn't get a second

chance. I knew exactly what he was doing. Grayson was trying to get me out of the city so he could continue to profit from his fraud without the possibility of me discovering it. I bet he couldn't bear to look at me each day knowing what he'd done. Tough! Now was not the time for me to go gallivanting around the country to make Alfred Grayson richer. The reality of my situation was now clear as crystal. I wouldn't be working at the Middlesex much longer, no matter if my case went to civil court or not. But before I could comment on Mr. Grayson's revelation Doris bustled in carrying a tea tray with a pot, two tea cups, a sugar bowl, and a jug of milk.

"Here you go luv...Uh...Mr. Grayson...sir," she bungled as she placed the tray on the cleared desk.

"Thanks, darlin'."

We both watched silently as Doris made the tea. There was no way I'd say a word in response to the offer while this nosy bint was within earshot! She placed a chipped cup and saucer on the table in front of me, and another was presented to Mr. Grayson, who gave her a slap on the arse, eliciting a girlish giggle. "Shut the door on your way out girl," Grayson called as she headed for the door.

The last thing I wanted at this moment was a cup of stewed tea. Grayson picked up his cup and took a noisy slurp. I pushed my teacup away. I'd been reluctant to admit to myself that my time at the music hall was over, but things were finally coming to a head and there was packing to do! I had to get out of this office and continue with my preparations.

"I'm ever so grateful for the opportunity, sir. But...can I think about it?" I asked meekly. "I've got some...well...personal arrangements that I need to smooth over before I can give you an answer," I added with a regretful wince.

Grayson eyed me suspiciously and then his grin brightened. "Well, well, well, 'ave

you got yourself a secret sweetheart Georgie-boy?” he snickered filthily and rubbed his hands together.

“My boy, my boy! Opportunities like this come once in a lifetime. Don’t you let the grip of a wet cunny fool ya! A good looking fellow like yourself can have as much quim as your pecker can handle when you’re out on tour. That’s one of the perks of touring; you love ‘em and leave ‘em.” he chuckled.

I felt sick. I could not believe I’d once thought Alfred Grayson to be a kind and agreeable boss. I stood, and made to leave but as I opened the door Grayson called,

“Three days George. I want your answer in three days. Preparations have to be made.” I looked back, nodded, and then hurried through the doorway.

I rushed through the dingy back corridors and doorways that led from the foyer to the dressing rooms. I was both bilious and furious. I knocked rapidly on the door of the dressing room.

“Hey, hey, ‘old yer ‘orses. Stop that bloomin’ racket,” Eloise called.

“Lou, let me in, quick.” I heard the slip lock snick and then Eloise pulled the door open. I rushed in, closed the door, and then leaned on it, as if the devil would soon be knocking.

“What the bleedin’ ‘ell ‘appened? You’re in a right two-and-eight.”

“I have to pack up my room and be ready to move quickly Lou. This ain’t no joke. Grayson’s trying to get rid of me.”

“He fired you?” she exclaimed furiously. “We’ll just see about that,” she said as she stormed towards the door, batting her hand as if she expected me to move and let her

pass.

“No, no! He wants to put me out on tour,” I clarified and that made her pause. “He said seven cities, a week in each.”

“That’s...that’s wonderful,” she brightened. “Isn’t it?”

“No, no, it’s not. He’s trying to get me out of the way, Lou. Can’t you see? I’m his biggest earner. He had to stop me from looking into publishing my songs. I swear, he was a changed man, all smiles and geniality. It gave me the willies. He even offered me a cup of tea!” I shuddered.

“He did WHAT?” Eloise exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock. Now my best friend understood the weight of what was happening. Such a gesture was not normal behavior for Alfred Grayson. He had a reputation for ducking out of the pub when it was his round, and if it wasn’t for Mr. Myrna keeping an eye on his accounts we’d have to hold him upside down by the ankles to get paid each week!

“He knows this scam will be found out sooner or later and so he’s pretending to do me a favour, saying it will benefit my career to do a national tour. He thinks that getting me out of London while still having me perform and earn for him will end his worries. I’ve got three days to think about it.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“What d’ya think I’m gonna do? I am not sticking around to be manipulated by that thieving snake. I may not have a roof over my head anymore, but I’ve got my pride. This won’t stand, you mark my words. Alfred Grayson is going down,” I said fiercely. My blood was up now and I would not stop until I got some justice.

PERCY

I was familiar with The Punch Tavern at 99 Fleet Street. It was named after the satirical magazine ‘Punch’, the offices of which were next door and so the editorial team, writers, and illustrators drank here. With such a pedigree of writerly and satirical clientele, the pub was frequented by journalists from all manner of publications. I’d arranged to meet George here at lunchtime on Thursday so that Oliver Simmons and I could share the information we’d assembled. We would decide on the correct way forward to get him the justice he deserved. I’d taken the family carriage from our offices Fleet Street with Simmons as my companion and advisor.

“The new ditty George and Eloise debuted last night went down a storm,” Simmons informed with a wistful smile. “Eloise was dressed as a saucy fellow, and George was the prim young lady he was trying to court. It was very funny, they are quite the comical twosome,” he added with fond remembrance.

“That’s good to hear. Did a copy of the manuscript go missing?”

“I had to get the last omnibus home, so I don’t know. But I’m sure George will have news.”

“I have a feeling that whatever we learn today, we will have to act fast in this matter Mr. Simmons.”

“Agreed. John Thatcher spent two days visiting purveyors of musical manuscripts and he collated some interesting information. I’ll explain the particulars when we’re with Mr. Dancie so I don’t have to repeat myself.”

The carriage drew up across the road from the pub, and so we stepped out onto the busy pavement and took our very lives in our hands, darting between carriages, carts, and omnibuses as we rushed to cross the road,

Simmons was at my side when we entered the decoratively tiled corridor for the Punch public house, and then passed through the double doors and into the smoky tap room. The smell was a pungent mix of male sweat, wood smoke, ale, and meat pies. A long mahogany bar was directly in front. There were chairs and tables to my right and left, many with patrons enjoying a pie and a pint for lunch. I paused and looked around before Simmons nudged me. "He's over there!" he said and then began to make his way through the crowd to a snug area with banquette seating.

George was sitting with Eloise and they'd already ordered drinks for us. When his burnished autumn eyes met mine a fire ignited beneath my skin and it was suddenly far too hot in here. He smiled as if he knew exactly the effect he had on me, and then moved along the seat so there was room for me to sit beside him and press out thighs together. The close contact calmed my nerves and at such close quarters I could inhale George's lovely personal scent. Simmons drew out the chair beside Eloise, and immediately took a hold of the waiting pint of bitter. "This is most welcome George, thank you," he said taking a long gulp.

"Yes, thank you," I added, taking a sip from the pint of cider he'd ordered for me. "We only have half an hour, so we'll have to be quick!" I said regretfully. "Tell us what happened?"

George proceeded to tell us about Alfred Grayson's attempt to get him out of London by way of a national theatre tour. He also informed that a copy of the newest manuscript was removed from the piano when nothing but the ghost light was lit on stage. George's own fellow was waiting outside the theater on Drury Lane in the driver's seat of a borrowed hack, and as he was the only cab awaiting a fare Alfred Grayson hopped in and asked to be taken to Blackfriars. He was dropped off down a

dingy laneway that secreted the back door of none other than Pittman's printers.

"He said Grayson gave a strange knock on the door, and then he saw a fellow in a leather apron covered in smears of ink come to the door. Grayson had a paper inside his coat which he gave to the fellow. It was a quick exchange, and neither said a word before Grayson returned to the cab and asked to be taken to Camden," George explained.

"So, Pittman's really is printing illegal manuscripts on the side. Interesting. The Guild will not be happy about this!" I relayed. Illegal printing was a very serious offence and would see a fellow barred from the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers. Without guild affiliation the business was ruined, for no one would work with Pittman's again. Simmons had previously spoken to a detective at Bow Street about the theft and illegal printing scam but was told he needed more proof. I thought that this might be the final piece of the puzzle to get the police to take notice.

Simmons removed a manila file from his jacket and placed it on the table. "This is full of evidence," he said proudly. "Our man Mr. Thatcher visited ten shops that sell musical manuscripts. He said that after palming a monetary enticement, the owners relented and told him that they purchased under the counter stock from Pittman's for a long time, some said years. They believed Alfred Grayson to be quite the prolific songwriter." Simmons explained.

"Years?" George and Eloise said in unison.

"That would mean George ain't the only victim of this vile scheme. Grayson's done it before!" Eloise raged.

"That is my understanding," Simmons agreed. "And in my learned legal opinion, we now have enough evidence to take this matter back to Bow Street."

“So, what do I do next?” George asked Simmons.

“If the police take this matter seriously, they’ll need to investigate and verify the information we provide. I have this file of evidence,” he said, patting the manila folder he’d placed on the table, “And the sooner you make a formal complaint, the better.”

“Take whatever time you need, Mr. Simmons,” I said. “I’ll inform Jonty Edwards that you won’t be back in the office this afternoon. The sooner this devil is arrested, the better!”

GEORGE

Mr. Simmons and I left the pub and immediately took a hack to Bow Street. A crowd had assembled outside the magistrate's court beside the police station and there was quite the ruckus. As Simmons and I stepped down from our hack and he paid the fair, a fellow was led out of the front doors of the magistrate's court in manacles, to be delivered to the waiting horse drawn police wagon. This was very unusual as criminals were usually taken out of the back door. Whoever this cove was, someone high up wanted him to see the full force of the public's disgust at his crimes. I shuddered, thinking that if the Peelers believed my story, soon Alfred Grayson would be getting the same treatment.

Together Simmons and I took the steps up and into the Bow Street police station. The station was busy, with ner-do-wells, drunkards, and skeevy looking coves being taken through the halls to be questioned or added to the drunk tank. I turned to Simmons to see he looked a little afraid and anxious at being in such a vexatious crowd.

"Keep an eye on your pockets," he said in warning tone, and he was right. This foyer was packed and a crowd was a pickpocket's dream!

"Let's get this over with, aye!" I suggested as I joined the queue to speak to the desk Sergeant. Simmons had previously spoken on this matter with a Detective Inspector Meadows who said he needed evidence to back up the claims. The desk Sergeant was a small pigeon-chested man in his fifties who wore a huge walrus moustache and oiled salt and pepper hair. I could tell by his bearing that he was an ex-soldier and sure enough, he had a game leg and limped to the counter to attend to us.

“Hello my good man. We would like to speak with Detective Inspector Meadows about the contents of this here file. We’re happy to wait,” Simmons said brightly, holding the manila file up for the man to see.

The desk Sergeant perused the two of us and I guess that he didn’t think much of what he saw because he said, “That’s all well and good then, cos DI Meadows is a very busy man.”

It seemed I’d need to use my wiles to soften this fellow up! “What’s your name, sir?” I enquired sweetly.

“Sergeant Ball,” he said hoitily, “and you are?”

“George Dancie. I’m an actor at the—”

“You’re Dixie Normus!” he exclaimed in a pleased gasp. Roars of laughter ensued from nosey buggers around us listening into our conversation.

“I beg your pardon!” a suited gentleman was passing said.

“Ch...ch... Chief Inspector Holbrooke, sir, sorry sir. This gentleman is an actor sir, he plays a character, a cowgirl who sings about her fella not being able to...” the sergeant stuttered, his face scarlet with embarrassment.

Holbrooke held up a calming hand, “That’s enough Sergeant Ball. Now, what can we do for you Mr.?”

“Dancie, George Dancie,” I offered my hand, which Holbrooke took and gave me a surprisingly soft handshake. If I wasn’t mistaken his finger brushed a circle into my palm. “This is my legal associate Mr. Simmons. We’ve come to deliver evidence on a very serious matter...it was requested by DI Meadows.”

Holbrooke turned to Sergeant Ball, “Is interview room one in use?”

“No sir.”

“Very well, I shall take this file to DI Meadows and gentlemen, if you would accompany Sergeant Ball you can wait for Meadows in the interview room.” With that, he plucked the file from Simmons grip and strode off down the hallway. Both Simmons and I watched him go with our prized file of evidence. I was worried. What the hell had just happened?

“Gentlemen, if you’d follow me,” Sergeant Ball said as he lifted the flap of the counter, stepped through and the proceeded to limp in the opposite direction to Holbrooke. Simmons and I shared a wary look before following the officer to interview room one.

We were sat in the interview room for what felt like hours. It was a cold room, half tiled in turquoise blue which added to the feeling that we’d been plunged into an ice house. Apart from Sergeant Ball coming back to ask for an autograph, we were left alone. When the door finally opened again and a man stepped in it was not this DI Meadows that Simmons had previously spoken to, but the tall, thin, suited man who had spoken to us earlier. Chief Inspector Holbrooke.

“Gentlemen,” he began pleasantly. “Mr. Simmons is it, yes?” he drawled, “I’d like to speak with Mr. Dancie alone if you wouldn’t mind,” he said pinning his powerful gaze on my mousy legal advisor.

“But sir, this is most irregular,” Simmons complained, but Holbrooke raised a calming hand.

“Indeed, indeed, but I insist that you allow us to converse in private. This matter does not concern you,” he said broaching no argument. Simmons then turned and gave me

a pained confused look. I nodded, letting him know it was alright for him to do as he was directed. He rose and with his face twisted into a confused scowl, he left the interview room and closed the door. I had no idea what was going on, and hoped Simmons hadn't left completely in case I needed him to help me.

"Ah, alone at last," Chief Inspector Holbrooke grinned, and his previous hard-faced look had softened to one of...goodness...affection? He pulled out the chair opposite me and sat.

"I must confess to being a little overcome to be meeting you at last...unconcealed, as it were," he admitted. "I saw you and your compatriot enter and I recognized your pretty eyes. I was sure as soon as I shook your hand that my eyes had not deceived me. You are indeed the darling songbird, Miss Georgette!"

Heat rose to pinken my cheeks. I lowered my eyelids then looked up coquettishly.

"It is you, goodness, my dear. How I long each week for another chance to hear you sing."

If I'm honest, I was rather taken aback. The Chief Inspector did look a little familiar, but I wasn't so sure that I'd be speaking so freely about Wychwood. As of yet, I hadn't said a word to confirm or deny his assertion. I was in a bleedin' police interview room for goodness sake and I worried that this was a trick to get me to reveal the existence of our secret club. The employer would want me to remain silent, and so I smiled and waited for Chief Inspector Holbrooke to continue.

"I'm so sorry for the delay. I read the file of evidence and then took it to Detective Inspector Meadows. I lit quite the fire under him. He's had an eye on Pittman's printworks for some time now and Mr. Alfred Grayson is also known to him. You'll be pleased to hear that the evidence you provided is enough for the crown to prosecute. Are you willing to give a witness statement and appear in court for the

crown?”

“Yes, of course, I’ll do whatever it takes to get justice. Grayson stole my songs and profited from them. That ain’t on,” I said fiercely.

“Good, good. Don’t you worry; this matter will be dealt with to the full force of the law.”

“Thank you, Chief Inspector. I’m much obliged. But I didn’t expect it to happen so quickly.”

“Justice never sleeps, Mr. Dancie!” he beamed, looking rather boyish. “Meadows will be along shortly to take your witness statement, and that of Mr. Simmons. I’ll issue an arrest warrant for both men and they’ll be in custody by the end of the day.” At that Holbrooke stood and I offered my hand for a gentlemanly hand shake, however, he bowed and kissed the back of my hand. “I look forward to meeting you again and hearing you sing.”

When the Chief Inspector had gone, I sat alone in a daze. Mr. Grayson would be arrested by the end of the day, which meant I had my final Thursday performance at the Middlesex tonight. I’d have to move quickly to remove my belongings from the theater before he was released on bail, cos he’d have a vengeful fire in his belly by then.

But to where could I go?

PERCY

The carriage pulled up at Hamilton Place and I exited first, holding the door open.

“Blow me! Percy! This place is a palace,” George exclaimed.

“Just you wait until I open the front door,” I added, pleased to have brought such a sparkle back into his eyes. The afternoon and evening had been quite the trial for both George and Eloise as they covertly packed George’s trunks and brought them down the back stairs at the theater to be ready to be moved onto my carriage while the show was on.

Alfred Grayson was arrested back stage while the French Can-Can dancers were entertaining the drunken crowd. It was perfect timing as the noise of cheering covered up Grayson’s mewling complaints of injustice. Alfred Grayson would be up before the magistrate at midday on Friday, and he would either be sent to Pentonville Prison to await his court date, or his bail would be set and he’d walk free...for the time being. If that happened, I was sure Grayson, and his accomplices would come looking for George. I could not let that happen. Simmons told me that the police had proof of long-term fraud and so this matter was out of George’s hands now.

We stood outside a building on Hyde Park Corner that I was intimately familiar with. It was seventeenth century in design, with wonderfully detailed stone carved cartouches and grotesques adorning the guttering to direct rainwater. The front door was painted vermilion, and the key I drew from my pocket fit snugly into the keyhole. Entering the marble foyer, I tasted the musty air and I doubted anyone had been here and opened a window since Theodore was last at his city bolt hole. Gods,

how long had it been? I missed him dreadfully. The apartment took up the whole lower floor of the huge building. The décor was lavish with high ceilings and intricate plasterwork. There were murals of cherubs and gold leaf detailing.

“I haven’t been here in months. The rooms all need airing,” I confessed as I opened the first set of double doors that led into a huge lounge. Grandfather had a vast collection of books, and they filled every space on the lines of shelves. I turned to see George standing in the doorway looking mesmerized. The room was not only crammed with books, there were sculptures of muscled Greek wrestlers, warriors in heroic poses, and paintings of nude men in all kinds of allegorical compositions...so many glorious examples of heroic masculinity.

“I can’t live here!” George gasped as he strode into the lounge.

“Why the devil not?” I asked, confused.

“You have eyes, Percy, look at the place. LOOK!” He spread his arms wide and turned in a circle with a wondrous beaming smile on his face. George sang the first line of the chorus of Captain Rimmer’s song. “Always look after your privates and your privates will look after you!” I laughed.

“The acoustics...they’re marvelous, bloody marvelous,” he cried excitedly before doing scales. He was right, his voice sounded clear as a bell.

“I don’t think I’ll ever sleep in this place, what with the high ceilings and all of the looking, and reading and exploring I’ll have to do.”

“Well, it seems you’d have gotten on very well with my late grandfather,” I grinned, “I’m sure he would have adored you as much as I do.” I met George’s beautiful gaze and the butterflies in my belly took to the wing, my deep affection for George mirrored back to me.

“This all belongs to me now. I haven’t a notion of what to do with all of Theo’s personal effects. The thought of sorting through his belongings is...well, I’ll avoid it for as long as I can.” I confessed.

“I can help...if you want. It’s not as if I’ll have much to do while this gruesome business with Grayson is sorting itself out,” George suggested. It was a kind gesture, but unnecessary. George didn’t have to work to earn his place with me. I wanted him here, I wanted him safe, and finally we could be alone and love freely when we pleased.

“Forgive me if this is an impertinent question, but...was your grandfather...like us?”

“What makes you say that?” I asked innocently.

“Eh, hello?” George said throwing my arms out again and directing to all of the artistic depictions of masculine perfection surrounding us.

“Oh! Gods,” I ran my fingers through my blond curls. “I really should have put two and two together long before he died,” I said full of regretful. “It was Theo who brought us together, you know. I would never have discovered Wychwood if he hadn’t left the token for me in his will.”

“God bless him! We shall have to drink to Theo then tonight!”

A clattering sound drew our attention and we both turned to see Eloise stagger into the room overburdened.

“Bloomin’ hell, this place is a palace!” she gasped as she dropped three carpet bags of George’s belongings inside the doorway. The lounge was a huge room with lots of floor space. I saw the moment a wicked twinkle lit in Eloise’s eyes and I knew she could not resist it. She ran and then did a back flip, landing with perfect poise in front

of me.

“Good lord that was remarkable!” I exclaimed with delight.

“Oh, my word, so much space, and you have doors that go out onto a garden...a garden George, you’ve got a bloomin’ garden!” Eloise said excitedly scurrying to the French doors and unlocking them to let the not so fresh city air into the room. “Oh, it’s lovely, in need of tending, but lovely anyways,” she called as she ran down a path in the overgrown lawn.

“Um, before we get too distracted, let’s at least move my belongings into the hall so we can go back and get the rest,” George suggested.

“Indeed.” I checked my pocket watch. It was after ten in the morning and Alfred Grayson was up before the magistrate at midday. George’s costumes were still at the theater, and we needed to clear out the dressing room. He would not be going back afterwards.

An hour and a half later everything George Dancie owned had been removed from the Middlesex Music hall. It was as if he’d never lived there at all. George was quiet and lost in his thoughts in the carriage on the way back to Hyde Park Corner. I supposed that leaving the place you’d called home for so many years must be upsetting, especially as the move had been thrust upon him by fear and necessity, and not of his choosing. A thought came to me then, that maybe I could share this new chapter with my paramour. Mother was away in the country, and so this was the perfect time for me to also fly the nest. Father would take no issue with my move, as he was aware Theodore had bequeathed me the city apartment, but I wondered what George would think about us living together. We’d not known one another for long, but he had swiftly become my best friend. My heart was committed to him for as long

as he would allow it.

I reached out and squeezed George's thigh to gain his attention. "Are you alright?" I asked softly, drawing him from his thoughts.

"No, I'm not, not yet anyways, but I will be," he said distractedly. "I've so many fond memories of the place and some of the people. I'm sad to turn my back on the Middlesex. You're a good friend, Percy. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't offered me a place to stay. And, as you said, there's a big world out there."

"There is," I paused for a beat. "Would you mind awfully if I...shared it with you?"

"The world or the apartment? George grinned. "There's plenty of space in both!" He halted for a moment before tentatively asking, "Do you really want to live with me?"

"I do. I think a change all round is good for us, don't you? Imagine sleeping in the same bed each night. Imagine being free to gamahuche me whenever you please. It will be quite the adventure."

"I want to kiss the face off you Percy Harcourt!" George admitted with a foxy grin, "But I guess as we're living together now, I can save it for later and take my sweet time!"

Goodness, I ran a finger around my collar to loosen it. It was...rather warm in the carriage. But I must admit I was already pleased with my decision.

"I hope you can cook something edible, cos a boiled egg and toast is just about all that I can manage," George laughed.

"No matter, I'll be placing a regular order with Fortnum and Mason to ensure we received a weekly delivery of groceries, and I'll employ a daily cook, and a char lady

to clean the place once a week and do the laundry.” George snuggled into me and laid his head on my shoulder and snuck his hand into mine.

“We’re going to be just fine, you and I, you’ll see!” he said, sounding brighter than he had done a few minutes ago.

When the carriage pulled up on Hamilton Place, Eloise was waiting at the door. I’d given her a pound note and asked her if she could buy victuals enough to see us well fed tonight. And from the baskets of foodstuffs she held, she’d done just that.

George and I were assisted by my driver to carry the remaining costume trunks and cases into the hallway. There was quite a pile now, as George kept a lot of the costumes and dresses that his mother had created to showcase her talents. He did not want to part with them or leave them for Grayson to pick over. But luckily the apartment had a great deal of space, four sizable bedrooms, a lounge, a study, a bathroom, and a kitchen. There was even a grand piano in the foyer that had been hidden under a white Holland cover. We would make space, find a room that George could call his own and use as his music room.

Eloise prepared a meal of fresh bread, warm mutton, meat pies, cheese, apples, and wine that she’d purchased from a local market. However, she was performing again tonight, and so after eating with us she had to take her leave.

“I hope you’re both very happy here. You deserve to be happy,” she said raising her glass for a final toast. We drank and then said our goodbyes. Eloise hugged us both and then headed for the door.

“Send a note when you get word about what’s happened to Grayson,” George called.

“Will do!” Eloise replied before the front door slammed shut.

Silence settled in the kitchen and I sank into it. George was now away from the clutches Alfred Grayson and safely ensconced in my apartment. I sat looking at him across the kitchen table and listened to the soft ticking of the clock on the mantle. Yes, I liked this. This felt right.

“I shall send a note to Blackwood Hall and instruct my manservant to pack up my room. I must say, it will be rather strange to not have a man-of-all-work at my beck and call. I suppose I shall have to learn to do things myself...will you teach me how to darn my socks?” I said wistfully.

“Oh, beloved. You stick to writing love poetry and I shall happily care for your wardrobe, and your holy socks!” We laughed and then George stood. “Come, before the daylight goes, let’s have a look around. We have to set the fires, and work out which room we’re sleeping in.”

I was so glad that my George was a practical sort of fellow because setting the fires hadn’t even crossed my mind!

GEORGE

Percy took my hand and led me from the kitchen. Walking around Hamilton Place was like stepping into a treasure chest. I couldn't quite believe I now lived here, and with Percy by my side. He led me down the marble hallway to inspect each room. I paused at the covered piano, tossed back the cover and opened the lid.

"Go on," Percy said fondly, and so I pulled the piano stool out and sat. Percy tugged the cover off completely to reveal a beautiful polished ebony grand piano by a company called Steinweg and Sons , which by the look of it, had barely been played.

"Theo had this shipped over from New York three years ago," Percy informed. "The maker is rather new. The company was set up by Theo's friend Heinrich Steinweg. I swear, it's a relief grandfather has this large foyer. I was here to witness the delivery and it would have been quite the bugger to get this monster upstairs!" he added. My heart felt full to bursting as I watched Percy watching me, his blond curls looking a little disheveled from lugging trunks and armfuls of costumes, but his eyes were bright and they looked upon me like I hung the moon. I'd never tire of this feeling.

I started to play and found the piano was tuned to perfection. It stunned me that it had remained here, under cover, as if it was waiting for me. I closed my eyes and played 'La rivière' a melancholic lullaby mother used to sing in French to soothe me when I was a child.

Walking by the river

A day of summer true

I saw you there my sweetheart

And I ran to you

I've loved you for a long time

And will love forever more

And think of you, and summer

When winter hounds my door.

I opened my eyes to see Percy's gaze affixed on me, his eyes glistening pools of adoration. I stopped playing and the silence that fell seemed vast.

"I'd say we need to find a bed," I suggested softly, then stood and offered Percy my hand. He took it and pulled me flush to his chest.

"Gods, you take the breath from me, George Dancie," he said before pressing his lips to mine for a passionate kiss. The initial heat of that joining became slower, languorous as if we both suddenly realized that we had time to enjoy it, time to explore and no one would invade our privacy and shame us. I pulled away first, "Let's find a bed," I suggested again.

We looked into the first of four bedrooms which we found was shuttered. The drapes were closed and when Percy pulled them open and the afternoon sunlight sent darts of brilliant golden light around the room. I saw that Holland covers concealed all furniture to protect it from dust. I pulled the cover draped over the bed off to find a grand French mahogany sleigh bed with gilded detailing. In bedrooms two and three we found the same set up.

“The furniture looks like it’s never been used,” I observed.

“I stayed over with grandfather sometimes, especially when mother was demanding things from me that I could not give. But I can’t recall Theo having other guests in these rooms. This was a place to rest his head while work was busy. And of course, this is where his most precious collections of art and books are stored. I think mother would have gotten the vapors if he’d decorated Blackwood Hall in the same vein,” he chuckled. It sounded like Mrs. Evangeline Harcourt was quite the matriarch and I did not look forward to meeting her.

Bedroom four was the largest and from the pair of monogrammed blue velvet slippers positioned at the end of the bed, this was Theodore Harcourt’s bedroom. It appeared that Theodore had employed a maidservant too, because the bed was freshly made and in good order, the scent of comforting lavender strong in the room. I thought Theo’s room might have smelled of him, of pipe smoke and flop sweat maybe, but the room was orderly, clean, and ready for us to use. I turned to see the glassy-eyed look Percy gave those monogrammed slippers.

“You miss your grandfather a lot, yes?”

“I do, I have many regrets where he’s concerned. I was too much in my own head to see how deeply he was suffering. I wish I’d have understood him as he understood me.” Percy’s sadness pulled at my heart.

“I understand you. And you, my dear, are exhausted. This is the coziest bedroom, come let’s ready this bedroom so we can sleep here...if that’s okay.”

“Yes, I like this room too. Theo said he didn’t want me to be alone anymore. I think it would give him comfort to know I’d found a love to share the bed.”

Evening was drawing in so I searched the mantle for a box of Sulphur matches, lit the

wall gas lights, and set the fire to warm the chilly room. Both Percy and I were drained with the excesses of the day and we would make ourselves comfortable here.

“Theo had the latest invention in hot water systems installed,” Percy informed. “It’s called Dr Bunsen’s atmospheric burner. I’ll light the gas and it should heat water enough for a bath in half an hour. I think we could do with a nice hot bath, don’t you?” Percy left the room and returned moments later.

“The water should be ready to run a bath soon enough,” he informed. I sighed and swooned theatrically onto the bed.

Percy joined me; he cupped my face and looked into my eyes. “I feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven. We have our own bath, hot running water and a posh latrine!” We laughed together and within moments we were wrestling. Percy was straddling my hips, holding my hands above my head; he grinned triumphantly and said,

“I seem to recall you said you wanted to kiss my face off,”

“Did I? You must be mistaken sir, for I am so very pure and virginal. I have never kissed a boy in my life,” I jested coquettishly.

“Oh, my sweet innocent angel, if that’s the case, please let me show you how things are done...for research, of course.”

“Of course. Very well sir.”

“A kiss is always best if the person is at close quarters, like this,” Percy said, leaning in pressing us chest to chest until I could feel the rapid beating of his heart and smell his wine scented breath against my skin.

“And then we press our mouths together and let the pleasure take us where it will.”

We luxuriated in sensual kisses while the bedroom heated up. I could have lain there all night, but Percy insisted we wash. While he readied the bath, I took a look in the study. A cobwebbed, half-consumed glass of whisky was on the desk and a journal was open. Naturally, I was curious, and then shocked to my core when I read the final words on the page.

“I know that this is the end and it will come at the hand of the man who loved me so dearly. I wish it to be this way, and I pray that we will be reunited beyond the veil, finally at peace, away from the constrictions of human bonds...”

I wondered how Theodore Harcourt had perished and didn't know if it was suitable conversation when bathing. Percy opened the door,

“Ah, there you are. What have you found?”

“Sorry, sorry, I shouldn't be nosey,” I said wracked with guilt, “But I must admit I am curious as to who Theodore was.”

“Come, join me in the tub. I shall tell you about Theo and his Edmund,” Percy reached out a hand of invitation.

“Oh,” I'd never bathed with a lover before and the thought of it made my pego twitch. I met Percy's eyes and noted, “You don't have a night shirt, or any smalls.”

“My belongings will be delivered tomorrow. I'll make do tonight. I'd rather hoped a nightshirt and smalls would be unnecessary!”

So, this was how it would be from now on! I liked this turn of events very much.

PERCY

A thudding sound woke me from the arms of my warm sleeping lover. The bedroom was dark, except for a shaft of bright sunlight peeking through the heavy drapes. Last night I'd spoken about how Theo met his end. We consumed two bottles of wine in honour of Theo and Edmund, and then before we slept, we'd made love twice in celebration of our partnership.

Naked, I scurried out of bed. Whoever this was at the door, they needed to stop that blasted racket urgently so as not to wake George. The shock of the frigid temperature made my morning wood wither to the size of a twig, and my bollocks shrivel to that of walnuts. I opened the wardrobe to see Theo's red velvet smoking jacket, which I hurriedly put on and tied, then I pushed my feet into his monogrammed slippers.

"Enough, enough of that," I said as I rushed down the darkened hall to unlock the front door. Eloise stood on the stoop, her face flushed and her expression anxious.

"What the devil's going on?"

"Quick, let me in," she said nervously. I stepped back to let her in. Then looked outside, left and right, but didn't see anything amiss in our little side street off Hyde Park corner.

"George is still asleep," I said in warning to Eloise.

"George is not still asleep," George informed groggily as he shuffled down the hall. "I don't think anyone could have slept through that racket."

“What the hell are you wearing?” Eloise guffawed as she stared at George.

“The wardrobe was open and Theo has some lovely garments. I hope you don’t mind that I borrowed this dressing gown.”

It was very flamboyant silk with lace cuffs, and not in a style Theo wore in his later years.

“So, what’s the reason for this rude awakening?” George asked.

“Grayson was denied bail,” Eloise revealed excitedly as she hurried past him and into the kitchen. We followed and waited in silent anticipation for her to share the news. She automatically started the gas range and was filling the kettle before she spoke again.

“He won’t be back anytime soon, if at all,” she said, “And you want to know what the most curious thing is?”

“Yes, tell us!” we said in frustrated unison.

“...turns out Grayson don’t actually own the Middlesex.”

“What do you mean he don’t own the Middlesex?” George asked perplexed. He pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table.

“Arthur’s brother’s a copper at Bow Street. Arthur told me last night that his brother told him that Grayson’s been charged with copyright infringement, fraud, and grand larceny ,” Eloise informed excitedly.

“Grand larceny?” George gasped.

“He had to prove his income to the court. So that meant his lawyer had to give a list of his properties, businesses, and earnings so the judge could decide on his bail. At the hearing it was revealed that Grayson leases the Middlesex...for one peppercorn a year...from the bleedin’ Duke of Bedford. Can you believe it?”

“One peppercorn. No, you’re havin’ a laugh!” George exclaimed.

“You know what this means?” I said, but George just looked at me blank faced. “It means that Alfred Grayson’s crimes are very serious, and his net worth was not enough to cover any bail amount,” I explained. “Clearly, no one would vouch for him either! My goodness, the Crown lawyer must have some damning evidence, far more than your witness statement, George!”

“Exactly!” Eloise brightened as she turned back to the counter and began to make tea. “Something skeevy’s been goin’ on and no mistake. He’s been up to no good right under our noses, George, and you ain’t the only victim.”

“Who’s the Duke of Bedford?” George asked perplexed.

“He’s a very wealthy man. The Bedford Estate owns swathes of the city, Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia, and Covent Garden. Every building is leasehold and pays a ground rent to the estate each year,” I informed. “But why would the Duke permit Alfred Grayson to lease and run a profitable business from a building he owns for a nominal rent?” I was very curious about this matter and as soon as I was in the office I’d call down to the Daily Gazette and speak with my father!

GEORGE

Percy left for the office by eight o'clock and when Eloise had eaten her fill and we'd caught up, she left to meet Mari. I was already missing the theater. But this was my life now. I'd be a fool to become maudlin when I had a handsome gentleman to care for me and this wonderful place to live in with him. It was time I settled in and made a place for myself here. And so, I began by unpacking some bags of necessities and then I made myself comfortable in the lounge. I was set up at a desk by the front window and able to see the comings and goings on Hamilton Place. I'd started to copy my songs into the wonderful leather-bound book Percy purchased for me, using the miraculous fountain pen. It felt good in my hand and the ink flowed so smoothly that I wrote and wrote, the hours passing without me realizing. The fire was now low, the morning coals having burned down to ashes, but the room was still comfortably warm. A knock on the front door startled me, and when I looked up a young lad wearing a flat cap and a threadbare coat scurried past the window. I went to investigate and by the door, there was an envelope on the floor. It was ivory with my name written in flowing purple script. I hurriedly picked it up, bemused that the employer knew my change of address before I'd officially told any, apart from my closest friends. I returned to the lounge, took a seat, and opened the letter. To my surprise it was not a notification of the next party, it was direction of a different kind.

A carriage will arrive at midday, be ready, as you are.

This was not an invitation to perform, but something else. How very curious! I was to travel as myself, and not as Miss Georgette. Would I finally meet the secretive employer, the man who owned Wychwood? The clock on the mantle said it was eleven-thirty so I had half an hour to ready myself. I hurried out to the hallway where

I'd sorted my costumes onto a garment rail. The suit I wore for Lord Dickey was the best clobber I owned.

As the mantle clock struck midday there was a knock on the door. I opened it to see a carriage waited for me, the driver standing beside the open door ready to close it when I climbed in. I'd left a note for Percy and I hoped his belongings would not turn up when I was not at home to receive them. I locked the front door and stepped up into the carriage, nervous about where I was being taken and what was about to occur.

The carriage traveled through the back streets of Mayfair and Marylebone to avoid the traffic on the main thoroughfares until we turned onto the more familiar Albany Street. It ran the length of Regents Park, which housed London Zoo. I usually traveled these roads at night when the fog was thick enough to slice with a switchblade. But today was a pleasant spring day and the sky was bright with not a cloud to spoil my view. When we began the ascent up the steep roadway at Primrose Hill, I was now sure we were heading for Wychwood.

The gates of the grand mansion were already open and a coach and two waited on the drive. My driver pulled up behind it. I opened the door, stepped out then rushed up to the front door. It opened without me knocking. A man I didn't know, not Mr. Joshua, answered the door. He appeared to be in his late fifties, but apart from silver flecks in his beard and pomaded dark hair, his face was handsome and finely boned.

"Ah, George, come in," he said, and his familiarity took me aback. Numbly I stepped in and he closed the door. The man stood opposite me and met my confused eyes. His mouth twitched nervously before he said,

"We're in the front parlour. I've lit a fire. It may be bright today but the breeze still has quite the bite of winter." He strode away down the hallway I was so very familiar with. Intrigued, I followed him into the parlour where I'd had many a flirty

conversation with the men of Club Fifty-Five. Who was he? He appeared familiar and yet I could not place where I'd met him before. Was this the employer? What did this fellow think I had to discuss with him? I entered the comfortable room and the gent closed the door behind me.

"Would you care for refreshment? I've made a pot of Coffee; it's Jamaican, very good."

"Um, yes, thank you, coffee would be welcome," I said, "Forgive me, but what am I doing here?"

The man was silent for a moment as he moved a tray onto a small table between two hearthside chairs. "Please help yourself," he invited and then gestured for me to take one of the seats. I removed my coat and bowler hat and tossed them over a side chair. I was befuddled but did as he directed. I sat and poured a cup of thick dark coffee, adding milk and a sugar lump.

The fellow sat to my left. He took a breath and I realised he too was nervous. Then he revealed, "My name is William Hastings, eighth Duke of Bedford." He offered me his hand. I shook it, looking dazedly at the man, who then proceeded to prepare his own cup of coffee.

"The owner of the house is a friend and they allow people to avail of it for discrete purposes. They know many secrets of those in society, and this house is a very useful meeting place. Oh, I am not a member of the club, but I am aware of what happens here." He paused and licked his lower lip tentatively. "My connection to you is why you were approached to entertain here."

His connection to...me? "I beg your pardon but I don't under—"

I never finished the sentence because he interrupted and his words took the breath

from me.

“I... knew your mother, Miss Violette D’Ancie,” he revealed. I understood then, knew in my gut exactly who this man was, and the weight of understanding nearly caved my chest in.

“I’m sorry that it’s taken so long to introduce myself,” he began.

I had my ma’s eyes and her mousy brown wavy hair, but, without a doubt, this man was familiar because it was like looking into a mirror. I had the Hastings jaw line and fine boned features.

“I wish I could have, but—circumstances did not permit this meeting earlier in your life,” William...my father...finished weakly.

My heart was beating fast and my mind sort of whited out. I was unable to catch a thought or even respond. If I didn’t speak soon, I was sure he’d think me an imbecile.

“How did you know my mother?” I said, my voice sounding cold and emotionless to my ears. I needed him to say the words. This was the fellow who had abandoned us, who didn’t love my ma enough to marry her when he got her with me. My mother struggled to do her best for me, but this...this man was rich, he’s the bloomin’ Duke of Bedford for god’s sake and he could have made sure he looked after the girl he made a son with. Feelings started to come back like the tide on a stormy sea rushing to meet the shore, and the prominent emotion was rage. William Hastings pulled me from my anger spiral when he began to speak.

“I met Violette in 1834. I was in town for a Christmas celebration, an annual get together with my chums from school. I was twenty-two, and admittedly quite the hellion back then. I was always drawn to a more bohemian lifestyle and so my fellows and I attended Evans Music and Supper room in Covent Garden. That was

where I first set eyes on Violette. She was so beautiful, so vibrant and I was at once bedazzled,” William paused, seemingly lost in remembrance before continuing.

“She was with a French actress I’d met before, Martine Marcel.”

I remembered Martine. She was my ma’s best friend. She’d left for America when I was around eleven years old. I remembered her farewell party, because we’d just moved into the Middlesex and ma bought a cake from a French patisserie in Regent Street, the likes of which I’d never seen before. I also recalled how mum missed her so.

“She was quite good at playing the ingénue and much in demand by directors in the London set. Martine introduced me to her friend and told me she was a costumier visiting from Paris. I was at once smitten. Violette had a way of flashing her brown eyes at me that made me feel quite drunk. She didn’t put on airs, and did not care for my status at all, happily poking fun at me in a way no one who knew my family name would have dared to do. It was...refreshing, I suppose. We became acquainted over several months. The more time I spent with her, the more I wanted to, and finally, she invited me to the apartment she shared with Martine.”

We know how this story goes! William Hastings had his way with the pretty French girl and then left her to deal with the consequences. For years I’d longed to know who my Pa was. I’d needed to understand why he hadn’t wanted us. But whenever I asked why I didn’t have a dad like the other kiddie’s ma always got upset. I guess I’d gotten my answer now. I reached for my cup of coffee and took a swallow to prevent myself from saying something I might regret. But William, my father, was lost in memories and continued his telling.

“In one week in November 1835 my life changed. I was sent word that my father had passed suddenly and I was now the Duke of Bedford. And then a day later Martine sent a telegram informing that Violette had given birth to a baby boy, and he was my

son. Of course, I longed to be with Violette, I wanted to meet the child, but you must understand the weight of heredity. The requirements of my family had to come first.”

“I’m your family,” I snarled like a wounded child. “I’m your flesh and blood; you don’t get closer family than that!”

Hastings pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, “I understand your anger, George, I do, but my hands were tied. I was forced go to Hartsmere Hall to deal with my father’s funeral and all of the ghastly minutiae of the estate. It was a dreadful time. You were two months old the first time I saw you and held you. My, what a pair of lungs you had for a mite so small,” he grinned affectionately at the memory. I did not feel affection at all.

“I was sure that I had sired you. Violette was not the kind of girl who would put a child on a fellow in that way. You are my son, George, and looking at the man you’ve grown into gives me no doubt of that. You are the image of me as a young man. My name is on your birth certificate as your father.”

I’d honestly never thought to look for my birth papers. I supposed I could have gotten my answers far sooner if I had.

“I’m deeply sorry I could not be the father you deserved. Before his death my father arranged a match. I could not back out of it. And so, I could never have offered Violette marriage.”

“Did you love my ma?” I needed to know that I was at least born of an act of love, not an illicit tumble.

“We were, in our quiet moments, in love, if you can believe that. I took my family’s hereditary duties seriously, but I was also determined to have a hand in raising my son.”

I let out a derisive laugh. “You had no hand in raising me, sir. I am solely the product of my mother’s love.”

“You are, yes, you are.” Hastings sat back and stared into the dancing flames in the hearth. There were nights when I was a nipper that I’d dream of a father who would come to love mum and me. A man who’d play with me, tell me stories and take me on adventures. And now, with the Duke of Bedford a hand span away from me I could not think of a damnable thing to say.

“Violette and I had a secret arrangement,” William explained. “I would come to town once a month to spend the weekend with my other family. We would take my carriage and we would go for walks in the park, to museums, cafes and then back to the new rooms I paid for. We were happy for a time, and I took great pleasure in watching you grow and explore the world. But my wedding approached and after a year of mourning, I had no choice but to back away. I wrote to Violette and explained my predicament. I sent money for your upkeep, but I never received a letter of reply.”

Clearly my ma hadn’t known that the man she loved was promised to another. She must have been broken hearted. “Were you surprised? As you said, my ma didn’t suffer fools. If she ever spoke to you again after that you were a lucky man!”

We were both silent for a tense moment before William rose and began to pace.

“Tell me. What happened next?” I demanded because I needed to understand my history.

“Elizabeta and I married, and after our honeymoon in Scotland I tried to reach out to Violette again, but she’d vacated the rooms I rented. It took a long time to discover what had become of you both. I resorted to employing an inquiry agent, and after seven years he found you both. Violette was working as a seamstress in Dover. She’d moved around a lot, only staying in a town for a handful of months. It was a

vagabond existence that I did not want for my boy. Violette was approached by my fellow, but refused my help and money for your upkeep. She was proud and determined, but I loved you both and could not give up. I had to find another way. When we were courting, Violette told me that she dreamed of making costumes for the great theaters of London. After you were born, she said that she wanted our boy schooled in the theater, not at a stuffy prep-school. My estate owns acres of land including that of Covent Garden and Drury Lane. I thought that if she was offered opportunities in the city there would be a chance we could meet and at least be friends. I could watch you grow. I wanted that so desperately. And so I made covert arrangements for her to gain employment at a theater.”

My blood ran cold with the realization. “Which theatre?”

“Do you even need me to say? Alfred Grayson was my tenant at The Middlesex Music Hall. I asked him to employ a costumier and allow her and her son to live at the theater. He did so, but he was quick to realize that I wanted him to house my mistress and my bastard. Grayson blackmailed me, and I had no choice but to acquiesce to his demands. My wife was pregnant at the time and the shock of learning I had a son would have done for her. So, we made an agreement and my lawyer amended the leasehold to show that all was required was a payment of one peppercorn per year. I also paid him a monthly stipend to ensure your needs were met.”

“Grayson told me he’d had an arrangement with my ma...made it sound like he got his rent paid in other ways.”

“He did what? I can assure you that your mother found Alfred Grayson quite repulsive. Harold would have told me if anything untoward had happened between them.”

“I beg your pardon. Harold, who watches the stage door?”

“Yes. Harold is my man. He sends reports to me each month.”

I was stunned. Had I lived in a bubble of my own imaginings? Because the reality of what occurred in my childhood was not as I remembered.

“I didn’t see you or Violette again until your twelfth birthday. Violette was comfortable at the Middlesex by then, she was happy. We met and finally mended our friendship. We had a birthday tea for you in your room. I brought a hamper of foods and you ate so much you made yourself quite ill.”

I recalled a birthday feast when I turned twelve, but believed Grayson had given me the hamper. “I don’t remember ever meeting you,” I said coldly.

“And why would you, you were but a child, and my visits were not regular. My wife, Elizabeta was sickly with her pregnancies and getting away was difficult to explain.”

“Do I have half-brothers or sisters?”

“Sadly no. Elizabeta and I would go on to have three sons, all stillborn. The final time the doctor decided it would be best to...ensure no other pregnancy was possible.”

“Oh. How dreadful. I’m sorry to hear that,” I said honestly. His poor wife not only had a husband who lied, but she was unable to give him the son he wanted.

“You are my only son...and my heir,” William said, as if reading my mind.

“What, no. No sir. I won’t have it, surely there’s some sibling or nobby cousin you can pass your title to. That’s not my life. I don’t want it,” I said passionately, and I meant every word. I was just starting my life with Percy and I would not have the boat rocked by this Duke revealing me as his bloomin’ bastard heir. I wanted to write, and perform and travel the world, not be shackled with his vast weight of his estate

when he eventually passed.

“Why are you telling me all of this now?” I demanded with frustration.

“That’s a fair question.” William took his seat again. “There are several reasons. My dear Elizabeta passed away three weeks ago, and so I no longer need to protect her from discovering my secret. And also, this beastly business with Alfred Grayson...”

My hackles rose. “What about Alfred Grayson?”

“Grayson is a tricky kind of fellow, a leech I’ve wanted to rid myself of for fifteen years,” he sneered.

“I received a note from Bow Street yesterday, Alfred Grayson had been arrested and he requested me to visit. I had no idea of the charges he’d been arrested for, but Grayson had maintained a hold over me and I was at his beck and call.”

“What did he want?” I asked grimly.

“He asked me to send my best lawyer to get him out of jail. And if they could not I was to pay his bail bond or he would reveal that I sired a bastard. I kept you a secret for the sake of my wife. Not being able to birth a live child nearly drove her insane, and she became...emotionally delicate. I didn't want her upset. But Grayson’s threats mean nothing now because Elizabeta is with our Lord and my secret can no longer hurt her. I told him that he could go hang for all I cared. When I left the interview room, I asked to speak with the police detective investigating the case. A DI Meadows told me what crimes he was arrested for. I knew then that I had to speak with you and make amends.”

PERCY

I returned to Hamilton Place to find a carriage loaded with my trunks waiting outside. I wondered why George had not opened the door and let the men move my belongings in. I hurriedly unlocked the front door to get my answer. George was not in residence, and so I instructed both Bentley and Sidney to carry the trunks in.

“If you need me to work for you here Mr. Harcourt, I would be pleased to do so, sir,” Sidney said eagerly as I directed him to one of the spare rooms where he could unpack my suits and place them in the empty wardrobe. Theo’s belongings required sorting out before this apartment would truly be our home. And at the current moment I did not want live-in servants. I longed to be alone with George and muddle through together. I didn’t know how long I’d be content to do without a man of all work, and I did not answer Sidney to tell him of my wishes. Maybe that was cruel of me. He was employed by my father to serve at Blackwood Hall, and if I was no longer in residence he may well soon be out of a job. However, it had been a long day in the office and I was concerned about where the devil George had gone. I strode into the lounge to find the coals were cold and he’d left a note on the desk for me telling me he’d be back later. Beside it was another note written in purple ink. I knew the penmanship, and seeing it confused me even more, because it was not a notification about the next party, but rather a summons to Wychwood by his employer. For what reason? Well, I supposed the fact that he... we had broken the rules was of concern. George was now cohabiting with a member of Club Fifty-Five after all! I hoped he would not lose his employment there as George loved playing Miss Georgette, and the members adored her.

Bentley and Sidney had unpacked my trunks and stowed my garments. When they

were leaving, I gave them both a large tip, and said that I would be in touch with Sidney vis-à-vis daily duties if he was no longer required at Blackwood Hall.

I'd planned to take George out to dinner tonight as he was no longer working in the evenings and so we could spend them together. But he was not home and I didn't know when he'd be back so I resorted to fixing myself a plate of pork pie, and cheese on toasted bread. The note told me that George was collected at midday and it was now after five o'clock. What could the employer have wanted of him that took so long?

Agitated, I set the fire, and as the evening was drawing in, I lit some candles, and opened a bottle of claret to enjoy with my meager meal.

I was editing a poem that would be included in my small book of love poetry when George arrived home. It was after six p.m. He was wearing Lord Dickey's costume, probably because it was the smartest suit he owned. I would soon change that!

"Is there any pork pie left? I'm famished," he asked as he removed his jacket, laid it over the back of a chair, and then slumped onto the couch beside me. I put my arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer. George seemed to melt into me. I pushed his wavy hair back and then gave him a kiss on the brow.

"Did you have a good day?" I asked softly, secretly desperate to know what had happened during his afternoon at Wychwood.

George let out a bone weary sigh. "I had a day of revelations, I suppose," he began solemnly, not his chipper self at all.

"What happened? I saw the note. You were taken to Wychwood?"

"I was. And I will tell you, but I need to eat and wash the day away. Did you light the

water boiler?”

“I did. You go and start the bath. I’ll make you a plate and put the kettle on, and then you can tell me all about it.” I was worried that George had lost his place at Wychwood because of our romantic entanglement. I knew that possibility would crush him, especially as he’d just moved out of the Middlesex and he didn’t have any performances arranged at other venues yet. I supposed he would need to find a theatrical agent to manage his career.

An hour later, we were bathed, fed, and enjoying a lovely bottle of Theo’s wine by the fire.

“I...err...met my father today,” George said surprising me.

“What the devil?” I sat up and glared at him in shock.

“Indeed. I don’t know what to make of it,” he admitted.

“I’m sure it’s a lot to take in. Tell me, let me ease your burden,” I reached out and George took my hand, entwining our fingers. He then proceeded to tell me about the man who had met him at Wychwood, and that the house was used as a meeting place for all manner of secret trysts, not just for Club Fifty-Five. He told me how his mother and father met. The revelations were astounding. George, my beloved George...was the illegitimate son of the Duke of Bedford. The duke had hidden his secret second family from his wife. He had loved Violette D’Ancie but was forced into an arranged marriage. Violette was heartbroken and she had run from the duke, taking their son, and evaded him for years. George revealed that the move to the Middlesex had been a lure created by the duke to fulfill the wishes of the woman he secretly loved. But, not long after Violette moved in Alfred Grayson had soon realised who she and George were to the duke and he blackmailed him for years.

"I want to hate him, my dad, but I can't. He seems to be a man who did his best to protect those he cared for in difficult circumstances. His wife carried three babes and they were all stillborn. Can you imagine what that would do to a woman? How cruel it would have been for her to discover her husband had sired a son with someone else."

"Why did he tell you now?"

"His wife passed away so there was no need to protect her anymore. And, Alfred Grayson tried to turn the screw to get out of jail. But as Mrs. Hastings is gone, William told him to hang. He didn't know Grayson was stealing my songs. But now he knows he said he'll make sure the scoundrel does time."

"So, you're the heir to the Bedford Estate?"

George sighed, "I'm his heir. But I told him I don't want his title. He can pass it on to a cousin twice removed or some such, I don't want it," he asserted.

"Good grief. So, Eloise was correct. The Duke of Bedford, your father, owns the Middlesex!"

"He does. In fact, he offered to give it to me in recompense for being an absent father."

"He offered to give you the theatre?" I said aghast.

"Yeah, this is why I was gone for so long. William said it's mine if I wished it so. He said he's attended many times and he was proud to see me on stage and see how much the crowd loves me. He said ma would have been so happy to watch me perform. It was her wish that I should be as much a part of the theater as she was. William made that happen for us. I supposed I can't fault him there. He even said

he would invest a thousand pounds in upgrading the place."

"Well, yes, it could do with a lick of paint. But, that's an astonishing offer. What are you going to do?"

"If...or more likely when Grayson gets sent down, the Middlesex will have to close and all those whose livelihoods depend upon it will be out of work. I've known many of the workers there since I was a nipper. They taught me the ropes and they were generous with their time. I know their families. I can't see all of those people out of work cos of my pride."

"Would you run the place yourself? What of your songs, and your acting?"

"Oh, I know my limits and I can't do it all. I'll have to employ a daily manager so that I can work on what I do best, writing, acting, and singing."

"Are you...moving back in to the theatre? I must admit, I do enjoy the thought of living with you here. But I understand if your plans have changed. Discovering you're a Hastings is quite the shocker!" I said, trying to sound positive, although in all honesty my heart was crumbling at the thought of it. We'd just begun our journey into love and I'd yearned so long to have a boy of my own, in the privacy of our own home.

"I figured that it's better for me, for us, if I have a separation between work, and where I live. I want to live here with you Percy. I want this to be our safe place, away from prying eyes. I want this to be where we can be ourselves." George turned to me then and captured my face in his hands. He looked into my eyes, and what I saw reflected there were love, peace, and belonging.

"You said that your grandfather Theodore made a terrible mistake by putting business and pride before his beloved Edmund Valentine and it made them both resentful and

unhappy. I don't want to make the same mistake,"

I wrapped my arms around George's hips and drew him closer.

"That's good news then, because Theo told me that once I found a fellow to love I should never let him go."

GEORGE

The trial of Alfred Grayson was moved to the Old Bailey, such was the public interest. And before the penny rags could invent nonsense about what had occurred at the music hall, I gave an exclusive interview to Percy for The Daily Gazette to ensure the truth was made public. The trial itself became quite the hot ticket, with the public gallery jam packed each day with coves desperate to be first to hear the evidence against Alfred Grayson.

After a week, where I'd given my witness account, along with the other acts who discovered their songs had been stolen, the verdict was finally read out. Alfred Grayson's fate was grim indeed. He was found guilty on the charges of copyright infringement, theft, and grand larceny. The high court judge, Lord Justice Cecil Fortesque sent him down for ten years. He was also to be sent on a convict ship to Australia to serve out his time doing hard labour. One thing was certain; Alfred Grayson would not be troubling me, the Duke, or merry old England again!

I began to have weekly dinners with my father at his club. I discovered that I liked him. Despite us being strangers, we had a lot in common. He was charming, kind and generous, and so I understood what my ma saw in him. I also accepted my father's offer and the Middlesex Theater was legally signed over to me to do with as I wished. Publicly, the story in the press was that I'd purchased the theater and the Duke of Bedford had offered a sizable investment to ensure the building was safe. And with such a large investment it took just three months to redecorate. I did away with the supper tables and had rows of luxurious seats fitted so we could comfortably get more bums on seats and increase the takings!

When the Middlesex reopened, it was for the grand premiere of a new musical show I'd written called 'The Impresario's End'. It involved all of the regular performers from the music hall. The story made a comic mockery of Alfred Grayson's scam, his trial, and his eventual end which involved being chased around the stage by coppers and getting kicked up the arse. The audience howled with laughter.

Percy and I went from strength to strength. He made his business dreams come true by setting up Dancie we linked arms as we strode to where Evangeline Harcourt stood, now stony faced beside my father, Victor, who was grinning with self-satisfaction.

"Mother, I'd like to introduce you to my partner and dearest friend...Miss Georgette D'Ancie."

The End

The third book in the Wychwood Trilogy is

The Keeper of Wychwood