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A young man with blonde hair, wearing a red and gold patterned jacket over a white ruffled shirt and a gold skirt, stands with his arms crossed in an ornate theater lobby. The background features a balcony with red curtains and gold railings, and a large chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

The
Pantomime
Prince

The Pantomime Prince

Samantha SoRelle

Balcarres Books LLC

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ISBN-13: 978-1-952789-13-7

ISBN-10: 1-952789-13-3

Cover design by: Samantha SoRelle

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Printed in the United States of America

The Pantomime Prince

London, England

Friday, December 22, 1887

Teddy gave himself a long look in the mirror trying to decide if his cheeks should be a little redder or if that would look tawdry. With a sigh, he reached for the tin of rouge. It was a Christmas pantomime after all, not Shakespeare. Everything else was so already so excessive, from the sets to the costumes to the veritable horde of musical hall girls in the chorus. He might as well go for the extra colour.

Suddenly, his dressing room door banged open. He startled, smearing a line of red across his cheek.

“For God’s sake!” he swore, reaching for the cold cream. He leaned in close to the mirror to see how bad it was. Bad. He’d have to redo the entire side of his face to fix it.

“Sorry, love,” said a woman’s voice, not sounding sorry in the least. “Another delivery. You want to keep them this time or should I just take them over to the chorus girls again?”

In the mirror, Teddy saw Mrs. Gill reflected behind him. She was a woman of indeterminate age, although however many years she had, she’d spent every single one of them in the theatre. She’d even married into the business, her husband being one of the stagehands on the fly rail for this particular production. The stories she could tell would make a gossip columnist salivate and possibly topple more than one noble house, but she had the rarest and most valued quality in a dresser—discretion. Whatever she might see or hear while cramming actors into their costumes would never go beyond the dressing room.

However, that didn’t keep her from speaking her mind while she was *in* said dressing room.

“You should put your poor suitor out of his misery. It’d be the kindest thing.”

She was right, but Teddy was barely listening. His entire focus was on the bouquet she held in her hands. Red camellias shot through with sprigs of basil leaves. Teddy didn’t even have to consult the

Language of Flowers book Belle had gifted him years ago. “You’re a Flame in My Heart ”and “Good Luck ”. A perfect pairing of sentiments intended for a fiery actress now headlining a Drury Lane pantomime, the sort who’d be given a dressing room all to herself for the privilege.

This dressing room in fact. Which was exactly the problem. Because Teddy wasn’t the one whose name was plastered across the marquee as the actor playing the role of Prince Florizel in *Sleeping Beauty*. That honour belonged to the famous and infamous Belle Brandy, musical hall darling, rising comedic star, and Teddy’s twin sister.

However, *Miss* Belle Brandy had found herself in the sort of condition that would be impossible to hide in the tight-fitting costumes of the principal boy role in a pantomime, intentionally designed to show off the figure of the actress playing the part. It was also the sort of condition that would end the career of an unmarried woman, especially one on the stage.

Which had all led to Teddy with a smear of red on his cheek in a dressing room that wasn’t his, preparing for a role that he shouldn’t have, and staring wistfully at flowers that weren’t meant for him.

Damn his sister. As much as he was excited to be an uncle, when he’d agreed to cover for Belle during her absence, it’d seemed like a bit of a lark. In regular pantos, the ugliest old male comedians played the role of the dame and the most beautiful of female performers played the heroic leading man, both to great celebration. All he was doing was combining both, a man playing the role of a woman playing the role of a man.

It hadn’t mattered at first that it was still Belle’s name on all the posters, or that he’d once again fallen into her shadow, or even that her costume of gold tights, slippers, and a bejeweled tunic were dangerously close to earning him a prison sentence for indecency. Or the fact that if word got out that it was a man flashing his legs and directing saucy winks to the audience every night there’d be a riot. He’d still been happy to fill in for his sister for the promise of a few weeks’ steady pay, and the theatre’s owners had been happy to not have to refund the ticket sales.

But that’d been before the flowers. There hadn’t been any opening night, but every few nights since had seen a small bouquet delivered before the performance.

“Is there a note tonight?” Teddy asked.

Mrs. Gill gave him a pitying look. Then she plucked a folded piece of paper from her apron.

“I’ll give ‘em to Maisie,” she said, her attention back to the flowers. “It’s not my place to say why, but she could do with a bit of cheering up. I’ll be right back to get that jacket on you. Fix your face; they called ten minutes to places as I came in.”

“Thank you, ten,” Teddy said meekly. He set the note down and focused on his makeup... until he heard the click of the dressing room door close behind her. Then he snatched up the paper and unfolded it, greedily taking in the few words.

Deliver to the Dressing Room of Belle Brandy:

To the True Beauty,

I am known to be a rational man and yet I cannot stop myself from sending you these. Their loveliness reminds me of your loveliness and knowing that they leave my hand for yours fills me with such hopes that I dare not speak of.

I seem to now be keeping a number of flower sellers in business, so if the rest of my sentiments are unwanted, you may at least know that you have kept many a hungry belly filled on a cold night.

Good luck tonight and every other,

Your Devoted Friend

Teddy carefully folded the note and leaned over to place it in the pocket of his greatcoat before turning back to finish his makeup. He’d reread it tonight when he got home. Reread it again and again until he had it memorised, then place it in the box with all the others.

For just a moment, he let himself pretend that the flowers and the letters attached really were meant for him and not his sister. That the mysterious suitor knew he wasn’t writing to the glamorous star Belle Brandy, but to her far less successful brother who struggled from small part to small part... when he wasn’t forcing himself into a costume designed for someone with much smaller feet and a much larger chest. As

much as Teddy loved the stage, he knew there were few places for him on it. His sister's feminine grace, beauty, and lithe figure had made her a star, while the exact same traits had made him an oddity, not fit for any role. And certainly not fit to have love letters addressed to him from a man.

From what he could tell from the notes, all written in the same bold but slightly messy hand, the suitor was funny, with a dry wit that never turned cutting. He also clearly cared for the poor if his continued cheer at being swindled by every flower seller this side of Covent Garden was any indication. He couldn't be a lord then, thank God. Teddy wouldn't know how to speak to a lord, even in the confines of his imagination. The flowers weren't the sort a man with that kind of wealth would send either, almost all common flowers still in season, packed into small bouquets rather than outlandish assortments of hothouse blooms.

Still, whoever he was, he was wealthy enough to have left flowers at the stage door nearly every night for weeks now. Had he been attending all those performances as well?

Teddy pulled the makeup brush away from his face and examined his work. The red streak was covered, but he still had to do his eyes. He reached for the stick of charcoal he kept for just such a purpose.

What would it be like to finally meet his suitor? Disastrous in real life, of course, but the version who lived in his mind, who knew he was writing to Teddy? Some might find it disconcerting to read words of such devotion from a man they didn't know, but for the first time in a long time, Teddy felt *wanted*. Even if it was all just a mistake on the man's part, Teddy couldn't help but dream. Would theirs be a fawning meeting at the stage door after a performance? Or would one of the notes contain an address for somewhere private and discreet?

Teddy fought back a blush. Ridiculous to waste his imaginings on things that would never happen. Besides, after tonight, the show would only run for four more performances, a matinee and evening show tomorrow, then two more on Christmas Eve. After that, the notes would stop. Teddy would go back to being himself and in a few months when his sister could return to the stage, she'd deal with any future notes and flowers. They were meant for her after all; he was just stealing them, much like he was stealing her name to play a lead role, something he'd always wanted but had always been out of reach.

He gave himself a last look in the mirror. Short and slim, he'd likely be able to pass for a girl even without the frankly garish makeup. With his Adam's apple covered by the prince's cravat, one could hardly tell the difference. He was far too dainty to ever be considered handsome, although his sister had always bemoaned that his lashes and lips were wasted on a man.

The notes were all addressed to "*the True Beauty*". If only the mysterious letter writer knew. Certainly, he thought he was being clever, for while the actress playing Sleeping Beauty was a lovely girl, if Belle had received the notes, she would've appreciated the play on her name as much as the assertion that she was the fairer of the two. But Teddy wasn't a true beauty at all, only disguised as one. Take the makeup off and he might be a fair man, but fair men hardly got bouquets sent to their dressing rooms. At least, not in respectable establishments.

He took one last moment to feel sorry for himself, then Mrs. Gill was bustling back in with his costume jacket and it was time for the show to begin.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Teddy couldn't help the smile that was plastered on his face as he wrapped his scarf around his neck. The audience had been an absolute delight. Their laughter at the antics of the pantomime dame were only drowned out by their hisses at the appearance of the villainous Carabosse and cheers when Teddy, as Prince Florizel, rescued Sleeping Beauty with a kiss on the cheek and they flew off together into their happily ever after with the help of some impressive stage effects and several strong men pulling on ropes.

His mind was still on the performance when he stepped out of the stage door and ran face-first into a man waiting outside.

"My apologies," he mumbled, pulling his hat down lower over his face. He'd wiped off all the cosmetics in his dressing room, but the damn charcoal was impossible to fully remove. He'd learned it was better to keep his eyes hidden than to invite comment from passersby on the street.

“My fault entirely,” the man said, his hands going to Teddy’s shoulders to ensure he would remain upright. “After all, I was the one blocking the doorway.”

“Just as well you chose this doorway then,” Teddy replied. “The stage door for the Theatre Royal is two down from ours, and I hear they have a live elephant onstage. You might have been crushed.”

The man gave a rich, booming laugh and Teddy couldn’t resist sneaking a peek.

He was a good deal taller than Teddy, more so even than most men, and he had a dark, close-cropped beard that was fashionable, but not so much as to be branded a dandy. It was hard to get a look at him, but even in the darkness Teddy could see the flash of bright hazel eyes sparkling with merriment.

“I’d much rather be run down by you than an elephant.”

“Yes, well,” Teddy said, doing his best not to get lost in the stranger’s eyes. He took a step back, out of the man’s loose grip. Immediately, the cold night air wrapped around him, digging under his collar despite the scarf. He suppressed a shiver. “I’m glad to hear an encounter with me is preferable to death by wild beast. It’s hardly the most flattering compliment, but I’ve heard worse.”

The stranger frowned and opened his mouth as if to say more, but only shook his head. They stood there a long moment until the silence between them grew awkward.

“I’d best be on my way,” said Teddy. “It’s a cold night and I have a hungry belly to fill.”

For some reason, this made the stranger laugh again, before treating Teddy to a smile that honestly made his knees a little weak.

“Even elephants have to eat,” the man said, stepping aside so Teddy could pass. As he did, Teddy caught the faint scent of bergamot and cloves.

“I thought we’d decided I was superior to the elephant?” said Teddy as he stepped into the street.

“Of course, but men also have their hungers.”

Teddy only shook his head at this, too tired from the performance to come up with a witty rejoinder. He tugged his hat down firmly against the wind that whistled along the narrow street. “Happy Christmas!” he called out, feet, heart, and stomach already set on getting home as quickly as possible.

“To you as well!” The man shouted back.

When he reached the corner, Teddy couldn't help but turn and take one last look at the handsome stranger. He still stood by the stage door, likely waiting for whichever chorus girl had struck his fancy. As Teddy watched, the man raised his hand in a gesture of farewell.

Embarrassed to be caught staring, Teddy gave a small wave in return, then buried his reddened cheeks deeper into his scarf and hurried home.

* * * * *

"Good Lord, will you look at this one!"

Teddy tightened the robe around him quickly as Mrs. Gill burst into his dressing room. At least he assumed it was Mrs. Gill. The voice was hers, but Teddy could see little more than a woman's skirts behind a positively enormous collection of flowers.

"Good Lord," he cried, rushing over before either the bouquet or Mrs. Gill toppled to the floor. He staggered a bit as he took the vase from her, the wet glass and weight of the flowers almost leading to disaster.

Between the two of them, they were able to get the flowers set on the dressing table. It was just as well he'd already applied his makeup as the explosion of blooms and greenery blocked the mirror completely.

"This can't possibly be for me," said Teddy, a bit out of breath. "Or rather, for Belle."

"I wouldn't be so certain." Mrs. Gill plucked a piece of paper from her ample bosom. "You'll forgive the storage, but it was already starting to rain and I had trouble enough bringing these in."

Teddy took the folded letter from her, but couldn't quite bring himself to open it. Instead, he let himself live in the dream that the flowers really were for him. The room was already beginning to fill with their scent, the perfume of each so delicate, but with so many and in so small a space, it was overwhelming.

He traced a finger over a petal. These were not the wares of a common flower seller. Red roses and red tulips made up the bulk of the bouquet with a few perfectly white gardenias mixed in, the pale blooms bright against the dark green of the surrounding foliage.

“Secret love,” whispered Teddy, stroking the gardenia again.

Red tulips meant “Declaration of love” in the language of flowers and the meaning of red roses was obvious. “I love you.”

Teddy blushed under his makeup. The meaning of the bouquet was shocking in its boldness. And the cost! In season, these flowers would have cost a small fortune. For hothouse blooms in the middle of winter? He was easily staring at more than he’d been paid for the entire run of the performance.

He couldn’t bring himself to delay any longer.

To the True Beauty,

Apologies for the forwardness of today’s bouquet, but I feel I must speak my heart. Attending two performances in a row is also unspeakably bold of me, but with so few left, I could not resist. Those who know me best would be shocked by my actions, for I am commonly believed to be a most reasonable and logical man, but from the moment I first laid eyes on you, I found I could not resist the sort of romantic gestures that I had always deemed foolish in others. Rest assured, I know how fantastical my actions must seem and put no expectations on you to return my feelings. I ask only that in this most magical of seasons, you indulge me just a little longer. If these flowers or this note bring a smile to your face, it will all have been worth it.

As ever,

Your Devoted Friend

“You’ll be wanting to keep this lot at least,” said Mrs. Gill. “For the vase if nothing else.”

It was certainly a fine vase. He’d never have the money to waste on enough flowers to fill it after these inevitably died, but he could set it on his dresser and admire the way the light hit it. It would be a reminder of his secret admirer on lonely nights.

But it wasn’t *his* secret admirer.

He sighed. “Why don’t you take the vase home, Mrs. Gill? Consider it a Christmas present.”

He had a few coins stashed away for her customary closing night gift, but this would be a nice addition. In all rights, he knew the vase wasn't his to give away, but the idea of seeing it on Belle's dresser every time he went over to her lodgings was too much. She didn't even know about her secret admirer; she'd never miss it.

Mrs. Gill shook her head. "I won't argue with you, but it seems a waste. Shall I give the flowers to the girls again?"

"Yes," said Teddy, tucking the letter away. That at least, he would keep. "No, wait!"

He carefully selected a single gardenia from the bouquet. One of the showier tulips or hardier roses might be a better choice to wear on his coat lapel, but he'd always been far too sentimental. He'd never have a chance to say "I love you" or declare his love for a man in any way, but he could hold on to the dream of his secret love for just a little longer.

* * * * *

Teddy rarely bothered to remove his makeup between performances on two-show days, but he'd be damned if he spent the time between the end of the matinee and the start of the evening performance stuck in that blasted theatre. It seemed every single chorus girl had decided to supplement her costume from his bouquet and if he saw one more rose-adorned bosom he was going to go mad. And since appearing outside the theatre in his makeup would give away the secret that Prince Florizel was decidedly *not* being played by the lovely Miss Brandy, he didn't have much of a choice. He'd rather not hear the sorts of things those on the streets had to say about a man in makeup either, true though they may be in his case.

As such, his face was raw from more than just the cold when he stepped out of the stage door and collided with a familiar figure.

"We must stop meeting this way," laughed the man as he set Teddy to rights for a second time.

"I'd apologise again," said Teddy. The corners of his mouth turned up involuntarily and his frustrations were momentarily forgotten. "But I'm afraid if you didn't learn your lesson about keeping a proper distance last night, I might have to go fetch one of those elephants to make sure it sticks!"

“I’d rather you didn’t,” the man replied. “This is a new hat. I’d hate to see it trampled.”

Teddy looked at the hat in question; it was a nondescript black top hat, but a sprig of holly tucked into the band gave it a festive look, the bright red berries drawing the eye from the drab grey of London in winter.

The man’s overcoat was a different one from the night before, this one with a fur collar that made Teddy’s fingers twitch with the desire to touch. He saw the man’s eyes flick to the lapel of his own much shabbier coat, but refused to let himself feel ashamed. It was a perfectly serviceable garment that kept him warm and dry. Besides, he spent his working hours in outfits that hurt the eye with their showiness; even if he loved the spectacle, there was much to be said for something practical and safe.

“Are you waiting for someone again today?” he asked. “Or do you just enjoy being run over?”

The man gave him a grin that made his eyes flash. “Perhaps it’s a bit of both. But yes, there is someone I was hoping to see.”

Teddy’s heart sank as a terrible thought struck him. Was this man Belle’s secret admirer? The idea was devastating. Not for Belle, of course, he was exactly the sort of witty, funny, handsome man she deserved. If he was as kind as he appeared, he might not even mind her having a child out of wedlock. They could be very happy together.

No, the idea was devastating for Teddy alone. He thought again of how nice the vase would have looked on his dresser and all the reasons he couldn’t keep it.

“You aren’t waiting for Belle Brandy, are you?” he asked, heart pounding so loudly in his ears he wasn’t sure he’d be able to hear a response. “It’s only that if you are, she... she uses a different exit from the theatre. A secret one. To avoid the adoring hordes, you see.

“Not that she doesn’t appreciate her fans,” he added quickly. If this man was someone his sister might be interested in, he didn’t want her to sound conceited. “She’s just had some trouble in the past getting home at a decent hour. Too kind for her own good really. A lovely girl.”

The man frowned “Miss Brandy isn’t even... That is, she definitely isn’t the one I’m here to see.”

“Oh.” Teddy didn’t know what else to say. If he wasn’t here for Belle, then who?

“Are you hungry again?” the man asked. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast and smells coming from that pub are driving me mad.”

Teddy grinned. The Queen’s Arms made some of the best kidney pies in the city. And if it wasn’t Belle the man was after, there was no reason Teddy shouldn’t enjoy his company instead. As a dining companion only, of course. “I was heading that way myself and wouldn’t mind splitting a table, Mister…”

“Doctor, actually,” said the man. “Dr. Basil Goodall.”

“Teddy Hollis. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Dr. Goodall.”

Teddy had never bothered coming up with a stage name for himself like his sister had. He was glad of it now, wanting to hear his name on Goodall’s lips.

“Just Basil, please.” The man-Basil-laughed. “I think that being bowled over by the same man twice entitles me to some degree of familiarity, eh, Teddy?”

Teddy ducked his head. “I suppose.”

“Excellent. Shall we? Not to be coarse, but I’m afraid my stomach is about to eat through my spine.”

“Is that your medical opinion?” Teddy laughed. “If so, I worry for your patients.”

“You can blame my patients for my condition! I was going to eat something at intermission, but was hunted down before I even took my seat and called away!”

“I’m sorry you missed the performance. Will the friend you’re waiting for be cross with you? I suppose we should wait for them before getting supper anyway.”

Basil gave a crooked grin, as if Teddy had said something very funny but he didn’t want to laugh. What that could be, Teddy had no idea.

“You know,” said Basil slowly. “I don’t think he’ll be cross it all. You see, he didn’t know I was planning on attending.”

“Perhaps you can surprise him later then.”

This time, Basil did laugh. “Perhaps I can. Listen, Teddy, before we go any further, I think you’ve guessed but-”

Basil didn't get to finish his sentence before the stage door burst open again, this time releasing a flock of chorus girls, their costumes barely covered by hastily pulled on coats.

"Hullo, Teddy," said one girl as she fixed her hat in place with a long pin. "You joining us today? We're going down the block for eels and trotters."

"No, thank you. I'll be at the Arms."

"Have a round for me," she winked. Then she pulled aside the collar of her coat. Fortunately, instead of an indecent amount of skin, all that was revealed was a veritable garden of roses and tulips.

"Thanks again for all the flowers," she said. "They're about the loveliest things I've ever laid eyes on."

"Thank you, Teddy," the other chorus girls, well, chorused. Then to his mortification, they all flashed the flowers stuffed into their bodices, some of which were so low that Teddy was afraid the blooms would have to be pulled out by the roots. And if he was mortified, then Basil must be absolutely appalled by the display.

As the girls fluttered off, Teddy turned to him, but Basil didn't have the look of a man who'd been suddenly battered with an abundance of female bosom. His eyes were wide, but filled with a vague sadness and his lips were pressed together in a tight line.

"Is everything all right?" Teddy asked. "I'm sorry about that. Theatre folk... Well, there's a reason people make certain assumptions."

"Yes," said Basil softly. "I feel like I may have been guilty of that myself."

To Teddy's surprise, Basil turned away, but after a moment he gave himself a shake. When he turned back, he was smiling again, but the light in his eyes had dimmed. When he spoke, his voice was rough, but Teddy assumed that was due to standing out in the cold for so long.

"It was very kind of you to give them those flowers. From the one on your lapel I'd thought... Well, such nonsense won't fill our bellies. I would still be honoured if you'd join me for supper. My treat, of course, then I'll let you get back to your life."

Teddy wasn't sure if he'd want to go back to a life that didn't have Basil in it. But he shook off the ridiculous thought.

"I'll let you buy supper, but the drinks are on me. I won't give you anything else to hold over me."

Basil's brow furrowed. "Hold over you?"

Teddy had nearly run the man over twice, the least he could do was buy him a drink in repayment. His hand drifted to his pocket, counting the coins there to make sure he could actually afford to do so. His fingers brushed the note folded carefully within and he had to bite back a sigh. He might as well enjoy his time with Basil while he could. After all, after tomorrow's performances, one dream would end. Why not make it two?

* * * * *

The next evening, Teddy huffed as he made his way into the wings of the stage with just a minute to spare before his cue. It wasn't his fault he was late. Well, not entirely. He might've spent a bit too long lounging around his dressing room without bothering to get into costume, dithering over his makeup and glancing in the mirror every few seconds for Mrs. Gill to come bursting in with another bouquet. He'd been unable to hide his disappointment when she'd entered empty-handed.

There hadn't been any flowers at today's matinee, so he'd been certain his-*the*-secret admirer must have something special planned for tonight. It was the last performance, after all, and Christmas Eve as well. After the final bow tonight, all the performers would head home to spend the holiday with their families and friends. Come Boxing Day, the crew would return to tear the set down to the bare stage floor in preparation for the next production.

If the admirer planned on ever revealing himself, tonight was the night. And yet, by the time the curtain had risen, there'd been no sign. Teddy couldn't decide whether to be relieved or disappointed. Relieved, because this meant he didn't have to worry about sending any gently rebuffing letters on behalf of his sister or dealing with any unpleasant encounters should the fellow realise his mistake. This way too, the admirer's identity could forever remain a secret, a dream for Teddy to remember fondly in dark times.

Still, he was disappointed, because it would've been nice to have one last bouquet. Something he could keep this time as a Christmas gift to himself. Receiving flowers had been the nicest thing to happen to him in a long while, aside from maybe his supper with Basil.

He smiled remembering it. He'd nearly been late for the evening performance yesterday too, losing all track of time as they'd chatted. Fortunately, he'd looked out the window in time to see the flock of chorus girls returning to the theatre but still barely made it back in time. Although Basil had been quiet at the start of supper, as they'd talked he'd roused himself out of whatever had caused his melancholy and became quite the spirited conversationalist.

Teddy couldn't remember the last time he'd smiled so much. The two of them should've had nothing in common, but for every story he'd told about his years in the theatre, Basil had an even more outrageous tale about the bizarre characters he encountered as a doctor and the frankly outlandish treatments he was expected to provide. When he'd told the one about the dowager who had *very* particular thoughts on how Basil should be treating her hysteria, Teddy had laughed so hard he'd thought he was going to choke on his kidney pie. It was a good thing he'd had a doctor with him.

He smiled at the memory. Onstage, Muddles the Pageboy earned a roar of laughter from the crowd. Teddy forced thoughts of flowers and fantasies, suppers and smiles away as he stepped in the light. That was his cue.

* * * * *

Teddy hated intermission. It was just long enough for his sweat to cool and make his costume itchy, but not long enough to do anything about it. He halfheartedly began gathering together the few personal items he had in his dressing room while he waited for the second act to begin.

"Thought we'd seen the last of these," Mrs. Gill said as she entered his dressing room with only the most perfunctory of knocks.

Teddy looked up at her, then tripped over his chair in his rush to get to his feet, clattering to the floor in a cloud of face powder.

“You best not have spilt that all over yourself. I can't clean that jacket in only five minutes.” Mrs. Gill ignored his struggle to stand, instead setting the bouquet she carried on his dressing table.

“What? How?” Teddy pulled himself upright.

“An usher handed it off to me, said it came from a gent in one of the box seats.”

Box seats. Those were by far the most expensive and prestigious in the theatre. They were also the only seats he could see from the stage without being blinded by the lights or losing the audience in the darkness entirely.

“Did he say anything else? Describe the man?”

The bouquet was small, much smaller than yesterday's and the flowers in it far less grand. He didn't know what that could mean. He was too busy puzzling it over to realise that it'd been several moments and Mrs. Gill still hadn't answered his questions.

With difficulty, he tore his eyes away from the bouquet. “Well? Did the usher say what he looked like? Or which box he was in?”

Mrs. Gill levelled him with a long look. When she finally spoke, her tone was hard, but not unkind. “He did. But it doesn't matter, does it?”

Something popped inside Teddy's heart, the bubble of hope he'd been so carefully holding onto finally slipping free and bursting.

No, it didn't matter. The final performance was almost over and with it the whole charade—the flowers, the letters, even his pretending to be his damned sister for the sake of the play—would end. He'd go back into Belle's shadow, scraping by on bit parts while she basked in the limelight and adoration. She'd probably have more secret admirers than she knew what to do with, while he'd make do with his increasingly worn stash of letters. Mrs. Gill was right; it didn't matter who the admirer was. It was all just another level of playacting. He'd never been Teddy's at all.

“Was there at least a note?” he asked, his voice thick.

Mrs. Gill gave him another look, but dutifully handed over the folded paper.

“I'll be back for you in three minutes,” she said softly, then left him to read the note in peace.

To the True Beauty,

I'm not sure if you will ever read this, as I find myself struck with a cowardice unfamiliar to me. A cowardice that arises from an uncertainty of whether to speak, or act, or merely let things be. I see now that I was mistaken in many of my choices yesterday. The flowers for one, were unspeakably ostentatious and far too lavish for how little we know each other.

Not that you didn't deserve them. Please, never think that. You deserve every bloom from every greenhouse in the country. I would have liked to have been the one to give them to you, but I see now that I went about this all wrong. I fear that in my presumptuousness, I never considered how you might feel about such a bouquet, or any of the bouquets at all. I should've known you wouldn't feel comfortable accepting such exorbitant gifts. Yet, I only thought of myself; how I wanted you to have them and know that there was someone thinking fondly of you.

I see now that it must have seemed like I was expecting repayment in the form of your attention. That instead of being flattering, the very concept of a secret admirer might be disquieting. None of this was ever my intention, but the damage has been done. I apologise for ever putting you in this uncomfortable situation. I never meant to hold anything over you. You are too kind, too generous, and too good-hearted to have been treated so shamefully.

When I sent the first bouquet, I dreamed of a romantic reveal in the final letter, but I should've known to stick with my rational ways. Romance doesn't suit me.

It does suit you, my dear prince, and I wish you a life full of it.

Happy Christmas and all the years to follow,

Your Devoted Friend

Teddy read the letter several times, not knowing what to think. It was heartbreaking and left him aching for the writer's sorrow even more than his own.

But there was something about it he couldn't quite put his finger on. He looked back at his final bouquet, hoping to find some answer there. There were surprisingly few flowers in it, and the additional greenery was made up of the sorts of things that could be obtained on any street corner. Had the admirer not cared what he sent with this last note or was there a deeper meaning hidden within?

The most obvious plant in the bundle was holly, a staple of the season, but also meaning "Simple Happiness". Interspersed amongst the holly was ivy, which could mean either "Affection" or "Fidelity", as well as sprigs of spearmint, which enhanced the meaning to "*Warm Affection*". There was also quite a lot of basil mixed in, a plant the admirer had sent before. Clearly he was not a theatre man or he'd know that sending anything meaning "Good Luck" to an actor would actually mean the opposite. Despite himself, Teddy couldn't help but smile at this.

In fact, the only actual flowers in the bouquet were several delicate sweet peas. Whether or not the admirer meant anything by the other plants, the inclusion of the sweet peas made his meaning clear. Terribly out of season, and not showy enough to be found in most hot houses, he must have searched all over to find them because sweet peas had a very specific meaning. "Goodbye."

* * * * *

The last half of the performance passed in a daze. It was just as well Teddy had been performing the role for weeks; he didn't miss a line even though he couldn't remember a single word he'd said.

Instead he'd repeated to himself again and again that Mrs. Gill was right, it didn't matter. The admirer had even said as much in his farewell letter. The letter that had been meant for Belle anyway, so even though Teddy knew the man was in the audience, trying to find him would be foolish at best, dangerous at worst. As such, he'd avoided looking towards the box seats the entire second act, directing all his comments to the front row and fixing his gaze well into the balcony during any soliloquies.

But now, with the cheers and whistles of the audience deafening him as he grasped his fellow performers' hands for their final ever bow, he couldn't help it. The centre bow was useless, he couldn't look into any boxes that direction. Then the company turned to the right and Teddy kept his chin raised,

searching the boxes even as he bowed to them. He wasn't sure what would give away the admirer, but there were no obvious suspects. No one seemed to be paying particular attention to Teddy over the rest of the company.

Then they turned to the right for their final bow and Teddy locked eyes with Dr. Basil Goodall.

They both froze.

Basil? Lord, it had been right in front of him all along! There'd even been basil sprigs in several of the bouquets. But it couldn't be him. Outside the stage door, Basil had said he wasn't waiting for Belle. Why had he been sending her flowers then? Had he been lying?

Teddy's heart beat faster. *I never meant to hold anything over you.* Teddy had told him he'd buy their drinks so Basil couldn't hold anything over him. That was a common phrase, but the final letter had also said, *You are too kind, too generous, and too good-hearted to have been treated so shamefully.* Those weren't lines praising Teddy's appearance, but his personality, maybe even alluding to how he felt overlooked in his career. He'd said as much in the stories he told over supper. Why would the secret admirer have picked those words unless he'd met Teddy and liked him for who he was, instead of just admiring another pretty face on the stage.

It was impossible. Had Basil been writing the letters to *him* all along?

In the time it took Teddy to recover from his shock, Basil had stopped clapping. As Teddy watched, unable to stop him, Basil snatched up his top hat and all but fled from the box. Then the curtain fell, cutting him off from view.

Teddy sprinted backstage, ignoring congratulations from the cast and drink offers from the crew. He barely had the presence of mind to grab his overcoat from his dressing room before charging into the night. There wasn't any time to be lost changing into proper dress. He hit the stage door with his shoulder while he tugged the coat over his costume. He was immediately disappointed not to stumble immediately in the arms of a waiting doctor, but Basil wouldn't be waiting. He'd said his goodbye in his letter—the same letter where he'd made it clear he believed he was terrible at romance and his feelings were unwanted.

The damned idiotic, ridiculous, wonderful man. Teddy had been half in love with him from his letters and it'd only taken a single supper to fall the rest of the way. And now if he wasn't fast enough, he'd lose it all.

Well, he wasn't losing the secret admirer-*his* secret admirer that easily.

Teddy rounded the corner to the front of the theatre just as the first wave of audience members began to exit. He scanned their faces, looking for a single one with a trim dark beard and dancing hazel eyes, but Basil was nowhere to be seen. Then he caught a glimpse of a figure well ahead of the crush, hurrying away with the fur of his collar turned up against the cold and a single holly twig tucked into the band of his top hat.

"Basil!" Teddy shouted, uncaring of the startled glances of the crowd around him. Basil paused for just a second before hurrying off even faster than before.

Teddy swore, then took off after him. His gold tights flashed before him as he ran, his costume slippers with their glass jewels catching the lamplight and slipping on the cobblestones. A grey mist enveloped him, chilling him to the bone as his coat flared behind him.

The slippers were his downfall. He was running harder, not wanting to lose sight of Basil in the swirling mist when he heard the whinny of a horse. He attempted to stop, arms cartwheeling and feet skidding as he tried to keep himself from falling into the intersection and being run over. He managed to throw himself back just as the animal reared up in front of him, but one of his slipper-clad feet slid into a hole from a missing cobblestone. As he fell, he heard something snap, then his ankle exploded in agony.

He howled in pain, only vaguely aware of the carriage that had nearly run him down coming to a halt in front of him, and the expletive-laden apologies of the driver. Then there was a warm hand on his shoulder and the smell of bergamot and cloves.

"My God, Teddy! Are you alright?"

"Basil?" Teddy asked as he tried to focus through the shards of fire stabbing his leg. "You're here."

"I know. I'm sorry. Let me look you over."

Teddy bit back a whimper as Basil's fingers pressed against his ankle. The pain hardly mattered though. Basil was here. He was here and he was touching Teddy and... on second thought, that really did hurt quite a lot.

"It might be broken," said Basil apologetically. "But I can't examine it properly here. If I help you, can you stand?"

For his admirer, Teddy could do anything.

Between them, they got him upright and with the driver's assistance, into the carriage itself—a big black growler, the sort available for hire outside every railroad station in the city with glass windows too filthy to see anything through. Teddy made himself as comfortable as possible while Basil gave the driver an address. Then the growler lurched to a start and Teddy realised that for the first time, he was in private with Basil. Basil, who was staring straight ahead, his body pressed against the carriage door so as to be as far from him as possible.

"I caught you," Teddy said softly.

Basil gave a small snort and glanced over at him quickly before looking away. "I don't think that's quite what happened."

"The result was the same."

This was enough to get Basil to look at him fully. "I thought you'd been crushed, Teddy. Crushed and it was my fault. First, I write you all those shameful letters, then I get you killed."

"Don't be ridiculous. Nothing of the sort happened. Although you do seem to have added kidnapping to your list of sins." Teddy tried to shift his weight, but that led to a bolt of pain that left him gasping.

Basil put his hand on his leg to still him. "I'm sorry. I'm taking you to my home. God, that sounds awful. Not for any... nefarious purposes, I promise, just to look at your ankle and get you out of your wet clothes. And into dry ones! Christ, I'm sorry, I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

Teddy grasped Basil's hand in his own and held it in place before Basil could think better of it.

"I thought your letters were for my sister," he said.

That stopped Basil's apologies in their tracks. "Your what?" He gaped.

"My sister. I thought your letters were for her."

"Why in God's name would I be writing your sister love letters?"

Teddy's heart fluttered. *Love letters. Love letters. Love letters!* "It was an easy assumption to make. They were sent to her dressing room after all, and addressed to 'The True Beauty'."

"Well, of course they were," Basil scoffed. "I knew you'd be in-your sister, I assume-Belle Brandy's dressing room. And I couldn't exactly address them to you because..."

"I know that now," Teddy said, not wanting thoughts of imprisonment and hard labour darkening their conversation. Not now, when he was starting to feel the smallest spark of hope that his dream might not be so out of reach after all.

"Although it does raise the question," he continued, "of how I acquired a secret admirer in the first place."

This caused Basil to look away again, but Teddy could see the blush rising from his fur collar.

"I saw you in *Twelfth Night* last year," Basil said. "You weren't on stage for nearly long enough, but when you were, I couldn't take my eyes off you. Not only an excellent actor and comedian, I thought you were the most handsome-the most *beautiful*-man I'd ever seen. So you can imagine my surprise when I was dragged to a panto by my friends to see the famous Belle Brandy, only to find you playing her part instead!"

"When I realised that no one else knew you were her, I saw my opportunity. I thought it would be romantic, like the love letters in *Twelfth Night*, although I admit I should have paid more attention to how that turned out in the play. But if any of my letters were intercepted, I could claim I was as taken in by your disguise as everyone else. Embarrassing certainly, but not life-ruining. As for sending love letters to another man, I admit I... made assumptions based on rumours about male actors that my attentions might not be unwanted."

"I told you," said Teddy, squeezing Basil's hand in his own. "There's a reason people make certain assumptions about us theatre folk. Some of them are true."

Basil looked back at him, hope lighting his face. Teddy wanted to kiss him more than he'd ever wanted anything.

He licked his lips and winced at the waxy taste. Lord, he was still in full makeup. It'd be running off his face now from the mist and the exertion of his run. He must look a mess.

"I'm not much of a prince now," he whispered, leaning in despite himself.

"No," said Basil. "But you're still a true beauty."

"*Your* beauty, my admirer."

Then Basil was kissing him. His lips were soft and his hand cupped Teddy's face gently. The kiss was short, almost chaste, save for the hot slide of Basil's tongue against his bottom lip. But the heat from it was enough to chase out the cold and leave Teddy burning up inside.

When Basil pulled away, his lips were red with Teddy's makeup. He let out a noise like a croak, then cleared his throat. "Let's get that ankle seen to, and then... Do you have somewhere you need to go for Christmas? I can drive you over in the morning."

Teddy laughed. "Tomorrow morning? Making assumptions again, are we?"

"Not at all," said Basil. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his lips with it, but that wasn't enough to hide his smile. "It doesn't make any sense sending you back out into the night with a possibly broken ankle. I think my suggestion is much more rational."

"And I think it's much more *romantic* to spend Christmas Day with my new lover." Then Teddy leaned in and got his lipstick all over Basil again.

Outside the dirty windows, the mist grew colder until small white flakes began to drift down from the sky. Through the snow, the growler trundled on, carrying inside it a story of mistaken identities, princes in disguise, dreams coming true, and the happiest of happily ever afters.

The End

Happy Holidays

Thank you for reading this festive short story. If you haven't already, be sure to sign up for the newsletter on www.SamanthaSoRelle.com to get future short stories one week early and for free!

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His Lordship's Secret

London 1818

Alfred Pennington, the Earl of Crawford, knows someone wants him dead. An illicit boxing match seems the perfect opportunity to hire a champion fighter to watch his back, but Alfie is shocked to recognize the beaten and bloody challenger as his childhood friend, Dominick, one of the few people who knows the truth about Alfie's past.

Life has been hard for Dominick, so he can't believe his luck when Alfie—now with fine manners and a fancy title—offers him a chance to escape the slums in order to catch a potential killer. That's difficult enough, but not falling in love with the refined, confident man his friend has become may prove trickier still.

The investigation draws the two men closer than ever, but it becomes clear that their years apart may prove too much to overcome. As the danger mounts, can they find their way through the past to a future together? Or will hidden secrets cost them their happiness... and their lives?

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About The Author

Samantha SoRelle

Sam grew up all over the world and finally settled in Southern California when she soaked up too much sunshine and got too lazy to move. When she's not writing, she's doing everything possible

to keep from writing. This has led to some unusual pastimes including but not limited to:

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