

Blue adored Covent Garden, and not simply because an excursion to the theater allowed him to don his evergreen coat with velvet trim, his violet waistcoat, and his finest linen shirt, complete with lace sleeves. Though, it must be said, Blue adored lace sleeves almost as much as Covent Garden.

When Blue stepped into Covent Garden, he always had the sense of coming home—the smell of lemon polish on the seats mingled with the scents of sawdust and paint from the creation of the elaborate settings. The operas were almost always superb, and when he attended—very nearly every night—he often preferred standing outside his box, closing his eyes, and listening to the singers' voices drift through the walls of the theater.

And the applause. Even if it was not for him, Blue could appreciate heartfelt applause.

Mostly, however, Blue came for the opera singers. They were a notoriously loose lot of women and men and Blue found them infinitely amusing. The men preened and the women strutted. The show backstage was as dramatic as that to which the audience was privy.

Having lent his applause to that of the rest of the audience's at the end of the performance, Blue anticipated the backstage performance now as he made his way into the bowels of the theater to where the singers shed their costumes and their stage characters. Blue's blood thrummed in his veins with anticipation. He had his eye on one opera singer in particular. If he were fortunate, he'd take her home tonight. How he'd enjoy waking up in the morning to the spill of her brown-red hair on his pillow, her lovely dark eyes full of lazy pleasure.

As he passed the costume room, several chorus singers in various states of undress waved at him.

"Ladies." He tipped his hat.

"Lord Ernest, do come and say hello," one topless wench pled.

"Why do you run off?" another in little more than a chemise called after him.

"My lord! We don't bite," a third said.

"Too bad," Blue murmured to himself, walking on without a backward glance.

He had no interest in chorus girls, especially those who only sought his attentions because he was the son of a duke. He was the sixth son of the Duke and Duchess of Ely, the tenth of eleven children. The country was positively infested with progeny of his ducal father. Blue could scarce keep up with his siblings' comings and goings. And they took no more interest in him than the chorus singers, who called him Lord Ernest, when anyone who knew him understood immediately that he preferred to be called Blue.

Helena liked to remind him that Blue was his codename, not his Christian name. One did not choose one's Christian name, however, and he had chosen—or at least sanctioned—his codename, which had been conferred in honor of the startling blue of his eyes.

He rounded the corner, entering a hallway teeming with gentlemen, armed with Christmas roses and kissing boughs. Fighting his way through the throng, he shouldered past two dressing rooms and tumbled to a stop before the third. Entry into the room was not an option as men spilled from it like ducklings from a nest. Men similarly overflowed from the other two rooms—that of the other female lead and the last, currently housing the male lead.

Blue did not begrudge those performers their admirers. Helena, however, was his.

Putting his hands to his mouth, Blue called, "Look over there! Is that Princess Charlotte?" He made a flourishing bow. "Your Royal Highness."

The next moment, Blue was all but run down by men scampering to have a look at the daughter of the Prince Regent and Caroline of Brunswick.

"She went that way!"

As one, the men turned and followed his pointed finger.

Blue straightened his cravat. "Opera singers are not the only ones who can act."

"Opera singers act?" a light, melodic voice asked. "High praise indeed."

Blue swept into Helena's dressing room, closing the door firmly behind him. She raised a brow and turned back to the mirror of her dressing table, where she was seated.

"I do try to flatter," he said, leaning against the door and admiring the slope of her neck, visible where the silk robe she wore dipped in back. "Did I succeed?"

"Admirably." She wiped the last of the stage makeup from her lips, leaving them rosy but no longer stark red. Her dark eyes met his in the mirror. "What do you want in return?"

Blue pushed away from the door and crossed the room in two strides. With measured movements, he removed his gloves, ignoring the way his hands shook with anticipation, and placed his fingers on her neck. He trailed his fingertips over the exposed flesh of her shoulders, pleased as gooseflesh appeared in his wake.

"Not much," he murmured, attempting desperately to still his trembling fingers. No matter how often he touched her, how many times he caressed her, each time seemed like the first. "Since we are alone, I thought I might steal a kiss."

"We are alone because you fabricated a royal appearance." She swiveled to face him.

Taking her hands, he pulled her to her feet. "One does what one must to steal a moment of privacy."

"You might have waited until I arrived home." Her hands settled on his chest. "We are married, Ernest."

His finger covered her lips. "Blue."

She rolled her eyes, but he bent his head and brushed his lips over hers, silencing her teasing remark. Her skin smelled faintly of powder and the cream she used to remove the cosmetics. He touched his lips to her cheek, her temple, the shell of her ear. She quivered, and her arms came around his neck, pressing her slim body into his.

His tongue played with her earlobe while his hands swept down her back. Beneath the robe she wore a thin chemise and nothing else. The silk flowed over her body like water, and he followed it to the gentle swell of her hips and the lush roundness of her bottom.

"Will you never give me a real kiss?" she asked, her lips tickling his cheek.

"Patience, madam."

Her mouth came closer to his. "Why?"

"I am attempting to build anticipation and drama."

"Careful you don't lose your audience."

"Never." He fused his mouth over hers, his lips sinking into satiny softness. He knew what she liked, the pressure and firmness, the angle and quick nip of his teeth.

Her mouth opened, and he ran his tongue over her teeth then swept inside. Her tongue met his, tangling briefly, and withdrawing. That only tempted him further, and he yanked her closer, kissed her more deeply.

"Helena!" A loud rap on the door startled them apart, and Helena quickly closed her robe and moved behind a screen. The door opened, and a small man with bushy muttonchops shouldered his way inside.

The man's eyes narrowed under his wild eyebrows. "You again," he said with a dismissive glance at Blue.

"A pleasure to see you again too, Mr. Burton. I would escort my wife to our carriage. We have an engagement tonight."

"Engagement, eh?" The long, curly eyebrows rose.

Blue inclined his head. "A Christmas Eve ball at the residence of the Duke and Duchess of Ely."

"Your parents?" Burton appeared unimpressed. "I heard His Grace forbid your wife from ever stepping foot in his home."

Helena's head popped out from behind the screen. "Is that true?"

"No!"

Her eyes narrowed.

Blue waved a hand, the lace fluttering dramatically. "Well, yes, but that was years ago."

It had been the first and last time the duke and duchess had met his wife. He had not seen them since, though he had often been formally invited. The invitation to this Christmas Eve ball was the first invitation from his parents with a personal note scrawled in his father's handwriting.

*Do come, Ernest. Your mother misses you.*

"The duke has come to his senses." Blue had attempted to convince Helena of this point for the last fortnight and had actually tired of hearing himself speak about it. Apparently, there was a first time for everything. "It's Christmas and time to let bygones be bygones and all that rot. As I am not the heir, nor with five older brothers ever like to be, I dare say he's realized he need not care what I do."

"Good. Then he may wait. I must discuss the second act with Hel—er, Lady Ernest."

"Good God, I'd rather you call her Helena." Blue took his wife's hand and, drawing her out from behind the screen, kissed it. "I shall wait for you outside, sweet."

As he moved toward the door, Helena took her seat at the dressing mirror. "The mishap in the second act was not my fault. Leopold missed his cue. I had to improvise."

"With scales?" the theater manager bellowed. Blue closed the door. He had no worries his wife would handle Burton with her usual aplomb. She was not one to shrink from conflict.

He stepped away from her dressing room and ducked into the nearby shadows. From his vantage point, he could see her door, but could not easily be seen by the men and women scurrying about backstage. He leaned carelessly against a support beam and straightened his cuffs.

Then he gave an exaggerated sigh. "I know you are there. This is my hidey-hole. Find your own."

"Now I understand your sudden interest in opera," Baron said, coming to stand beside him.

"She's lovely. I always thought your tastes ran to baritones."

"I'm full of surprises."

"So am I."

Blue gave his lace a last fluff and lifted his gaze to the man beside him. Winston Keating was the new leader of the Barbican group, the Crown's most elite espionage wing. They'd recently foiled an attempt to blow up Parliament, and that had been on top of thwarting an assassination attempt on the Prince Regent himself.

"Hardly," Blue remarked, giving Baron's wrinkled coat a disdainful glance. One would think a man with those broad shoulders might look better in a coat.

"I imagine you are here in an attempt to entice me back to the Barbican group."

Baron tried to look innocent. "Did you ever leave? I seem to remember you were at Bonde's side when she brought down Foncé."

"Coincidence."

"Bulls—"

"What is it you want, Lord Keating?" Blue interrupted. "I have a pressing engagement."

"Yes, I can imagine you will be pressing the lovely Miss Giles into your carriage squabs—"

Blue moved quickly, ramming his arm against Baron's throat and slamming the man against the support beam.

"A word of caution, my lord."

Baron's eyes bulged as he fought for breath.

"Take care what language you use to refer to my wife."

"*Your wife?*" Baron wheezed.

Blue released him. "As per my lady's request, I have indeed retired from service. You may take your letter or missive or"—he gestured toward Baron's waistcoat pocket—"intercepted orders and go."

Baron merely stared at Blue. He was either still catching his breath or he was suitably awed at Blue's powers of deduction.

"You are married?"

Or Baron could not conceive of Blue having a wife.

Understandable. At times Blue could hardly believe it, though he'd been married for more than half a decade.

"And you call yourself a spy." Blue shook his head with exaggerated woe. "Run home to Lady Keating and your offspring. I understand she is breeding again. I imagine she will need her feet rubbed or some such thing."

"I call myself an agent of the Crown," Baron said, straightening his bull-like shoulders. "As did you at one time. Your country needs you."

Blue cast a glance behind him. Helena's door was still closed. He ducked behind the support beam, motioning Baron to follow.

"I have served the Crown. Foncé is dead, and the Maîtriser group in shambles—thanks in no small part to me. I have done my duty and am formally retired."

A sliver of light pierced the floor to his left.

"I do accept your apology, Mr. Burton." His wife's voice sounded from her doorway. Clearly, her interview was at an end.

Would Baron never leave?

"Goodbye." Blue shooed Baron with his hands. The last thing he needed was for Helena to think he had taken to working with the Barbican group again. He'd told her he was through with spying, and he'd meant it. She'd understood when he'd had to go back, briefly, to help Bonde defeat Foncé. But the madman who had endangered both of their lives was now dead, and Blue would keep his promise to make Helena his priority.

"Blue," Baron muttered, refusing to be pushed aside. The man was a veritable mountain. "I need but five minutes of your time." He waved a crumpled sheet of folded vellum.

"Ernest?"

Blue heard Helena's questioning voice.

"Go away," he hissed at Baron. "Coming!" Blue called to Helena.

"If you would just glance at the missive—"

"Where are you?" Helena asked, a laugh in her voice. "Hiding?"

Blue glared at Baron. "No missive. Ask Wolf to help you." Blue stepped out from behind the beam and waved at Helena.

"There you are." She'd dressed in a green gown with red ribbons on the sleeves, bodice, and hem. A green ribbon threaded through her upswept hair, accenting the auburn tresses. She'd chosen the perfect attire for a Christmas Eve ball. He eyed the ribbons, tied primly at the swell of her breasts. Later he would untie them and unwrap her in a private holiday celebration.

"Why are you hiding back there?" she asked.

"I...ah...dropped my pocket watch. One moment, and I'll help you with your wrap."

"Clearly this is a pocket-watch crisis. I shall fetch my wrap and be back in a moment."

Blue waited until she'd disappeared into her dressing room before facing Baron again. One of the Barbican leader's shoulders was jammed against the beam.

"Found your pocket watch yet?" Baron drawled.

"Go away. Happy Christmas and all that." He turned to walk away.

Baron put a restraining hand on Blue's shoulder. Blue paused, looked at the offending hand, and removed it finger by finger.

"You are the best we have, Blue. The missive is coded, and no one knows the cipher. Five minutes, and I know you will decode it for us."

Blue could feel his resolve wavering. He did love a good puzzle, and a coded missive was one of his favorites. The content was undoubtedly banal—troop numbers or weapons shipments—but still the challenge invigorated him.

He tamped down the urge to agree, stilling his itching fingers at his side. "I am retired."

Baron skirted around to face him and spread his hands. "Fine. Forget I was ever here."

"With pleasure." Blue moved aside, tossing a curious look at Baron as he made his way toward Helena's dressing room. His escape had been almost too easy. He'd expected Baron to make a scene with Helena or further appeal to Blue's sense of patriotism.

Helena emerged, holding a red velvet cloak before her. "Who were you speaking with?" she asked, giving him her back, so he might drape the garment over her shoulders.

"No one of any consequence."

"You sound odd." She peeked at him. "Almost guilty."

"Me, guilty?" Blue barely contained a wince. He might as well confess all now.

"Do not say you are spying again," she said with a laugh.

"Oh, you are too amusing." Blue laughed as well, an overblown, deep guffaw.

Had he implied he could act? He'd lost the talent in the last five minutes.

He dropped the heavy velvet cloak over the bared skin of her shoulders and she reached up to fasten the ties. Blue glanced back once again, but Baron had disappeared.

Good. The source of temptation had been removed. He shifted, preparing to offer his arm to his wife, when he heard a rustling sound. He patted his coat, which crinkled in response.

"That bastard."

"Pardon?" Helena said, looking up at him.

"You look lovely," Blue said, reaching into his pocket and feeling the missive tucked safely inside. "Are you ready for the ball?"

"As ready as I will ever be. Tell me we shall leave early."

"We shall leave early," he said, taking her arm.

Nestled between them, the forbidden missive seemed to burn a hole through his pocket.