

Flirting with Forever

Chapter One

Covent Garden, London, 1673.

Peter pressed an exquisitely-cobbled shoe against the side of the desk drawer and rubbed his aching temples. Despite all the appointments of success--the fine clothes, the freedom to paint when and what he choose, the admiration of a highly-appreciative king, row upon row of apprentices doing his command, a full waiting room and an even fuller account with his bankers--he felt nothing but despair. Even the fat emerald ring, once such a prize, was a torture for it reminded him of Ursula and how he had treated her. It had been heartbreaking to live through part of his life the first time. And now to be asked to live through it again was a sorrow so exquisite, he could barely speak.

"Peter," Mertons said, "I hope you know how much the Guild appreciates this."

Peter grunted. The Executive Guild managed the souls passing through the Afterlife, specifically those within the artists section, and Mertons was the time jump accountant who had been assigned to this case. Time jump accountant was his official title, but Peter knew the unofficial reason the Guild had sent him was to ensure the moody, unreliable painter they'd enlisted managed the mission properly and stayed within the prescribed rules, so perhaps 'nursemaid' might be more appropriate.

"It wasn't as if I had a choice." Peter slitted his eyes and let the dying November sun warm his face. The evenings were the hardest. During the day he could lose himself in painting, but at night... At night, all he had was wine and his memories. How could he have once held success in such esteem?

Mertons shrugged. "You will get what you want, Peter--a new life as an artist." The Guild had the power to choose the new life into which a member of its constituency, in this case, painters, would arrive, bundled in his or her new mother's arms, with only an obscure hint of the sadness or joy of their former life to tint their memories.

And while Peter desperately wanted a new life as an artist--he couldn't imagine himself, or at least his soul, spending the next sixty years as a barber or dairyman--what he really wanted was a chance to redeem himself, which he knew he would never find. He had finally agreed to slip back into the pinched, desiccated skin he had sloughed off at his death two years earlier for one reason only--to try to return Ursula's good name to her, an intention he had purposefully not shared with Mertons, who had been assigned by the Guild to accompany him and who monitored the attacks on his precious time travel constraints with the ferocity of mother lion.

"Tell me again what we know." Peter had heard the story several times since their arrival a week ago. Nonetheless Mertons liked to tell it, and it would give Peter time to prepare for acting out his plan. He glanced at the clock and then at the small storage room off the office. Just before five. Good.

Mertons sighed and looked down at his clipboard. "To be honest, we know very little. The writer's name is Campbell Stratford--a Scot," he added as if that added a significant detail to the understanding of the event. "The book will be an embarrassment to the Guild--"

"An embarrassment to van Dyck, you mean." Peter had immense respect for the work of the man he succeeded as Royal Painter to the court of Charles II, but it irked him that Guild would jump through hoops to help certain of its dead members, but not others.

"An embarrassment to one of our members is an embarrassment to the Guild, Peter. We do not want van Dyck's ill-considered contretemps with a few women outside his marriage to overshadow a career that should be judged strictly on its professional merits--merits I might add that are both numerous and laudatory."

A few women? Peter, who had known van Dyke well, rolled his eyes. "I expect the Guild doesn't particularly like the idea of someone on Earth running around with access to a time tube either."

The muscles in Mertons's jaw contracted. The Guild, like every organization that managed souls in the Afterlife, had a stake in ensuring the tubes were tightly controlled. Representatives of the Guild, or, like Peter, those chosen to serve their needs, were the only people allowed to travel the tubes as conscious adults, and then only under very special circumstances. That this Stratford fellow would find a way to breach the tube

must terrify the Guild, who claimed that altering the fabric of time could be as dangerous as an asteroid hit. No one in the world on Earth had done it in decades. Peter didn't doubt there was some level of danger, though he suspected the Guild's concern was just as much about retaining power as averting chaos.

"No, Peter, the Guild does not care for it, and neither should you. The results would be unimaginable."

Peter made an ambiguous noise. A few more minutes, and then all he'd need was a brief distraction. "Tell me, how did you come to know the writer would be traveling here?" This was the one part of the story Mertons had not shared with him, and the calculations showed in his eyes. Fortunately, Peter thought, there's nothing like a time accountant for long-winded self-aggrandizement, especially when it comes to the intricacies of time travel.

"I probably shouldn't be telling you this--"

Peter gave him a conspiratorial nod.

--but it was me. Dawson, the associate in External Affairs, was reviewing the daily log and saw Stratford's book spiked a seven-point-three on incongruity. Normally, you'd ignore something like that unless it happened again, but when Dawson brought it to me, there was just something odd about it. Over a seven on an art biography? An art biography by an unknown author? I got permission to check it against the Alexandrian tables--the safest way for someone in the present to examine future occurrences--and the book, that is to say, the book that Stratford will write if we don't stop him, was filled with details knowable only to someone who'd been back in time."

"Perhaps he guessed. Some writers are very good at that, I hear."

"Perhaps he guessed van Dyck liked his eggs poached in cream and sprinkled with nutmeg? Perhaps he guessed van Dyck entertained his closest friends with a portrait of Lord Harwich painted with horns and a snout?" Mertons lowered his voice to a whisper. "Perhaps he guessed van Dyck needed a brisk paddle to ensure the structural integrity of his 'monument to Cupid'?"

"Oh, dear."

"And it's worse than that."

"I'd rather not hear."

"Stratford gave himself carte blanche to fill the rest of the book with whatever lies he wanted. He calls it a 'fictography.' Do you see? A fictional biography. An abomination, if you ask me. Why can't writers stick to the truth?" Mertons returned his gaze to his ever-present clipboard. As tall as a boat pole and nearly as thin with a crown as hairless as a baby's, he looked about as much like an apprentice painter in sixteen seventy-three as he did a centurion at the Battle of Thermopylae. Nonetheless, that was the cover the Guild had instructed Peter to provide him.

"And why does Stratford come to me?"

Mertons shuffled his feet. "We don't know."

"Don't know?" Peter cultivated surprise. This was his favorite part of the story since the answer could not be found on the clipboard or anywhere else.

"No. Perhaps he's broken the security algorithm. Perhaps he's found a tube we're not aware of. All we know is this biography--pardon me, fictography--will change the way thousands of people feel about van Dyck. So our job is to stop Stratford from writing that book. The book nothing but lies."

"Nothing but lies? You mean van Dyck didn't pass around a portrait of Lord Harwich?" Peter had seen it himself once. He declined to call to mind the other more picturesque detail of his colleague's personal life.

Mertons flushed. "There's a difference between telling a story and appealing to the prurient interest of readers. Stratford takes the story, embellishes it and with The Girl With a Golden Earring makes the entire seventeenth century art world seem like some sort of giant sultan's tent in which artists run, satyr-like, over pillowed beds, chasing willing and unwilling women to their reputational doom."

Peter considered the artists he had known, including himself before the settling influence of Ursula, and found the description to be more accurate than not.

"I see you are amused." Mertons crossed his arms. "I wonder if you would feel the same if the subject of the biography was you."

Peter stiffened. He hated to admit it, but Mertons was right. Seeing his own life splashed across the pages, stripped bare for the amusement of a reading public who would not care what parts were true, or regretted, so long as the salacious bits of intrigue kept them turning pages, would be more than he could bear. There was a special place in Hell for a writer like Stratford, who picked the bones of the dead to further his own career, and Peter supposed he should be glad he'd have a hand in bringing the blackguard down. But the thought brought him little joy, trapped as he was in one of the most unhappy times of his former life. He wished another artist in the Afterlife had been given the unusual opportunity. He glanced again at the clock. "And here, in this studio, in this particular time, was the only--what do you call it?--point of intersection?"

"No, there are a number of intersections in van Dyck's life as well, but the Guild

is just about to place him in his new life, and, as you know, we cannot retrieve him once that has been done. You, being between lives, are available. Though perhaps when you said 'in particular time' you were referring to this time in your own life?" Mertons unclipped the mass of paper in his hand and fanned it. "In that case, the answer is no as well. There were two intersections in your own life, each approximately equal in likelihood, but the other you may recall--"

Peter remembered and held up an abrupt hand to stop him. "I recall. Thank you."

The other likely intersection point had been eight years earlier, when Peter and Ursula had been happy. While Peter hadn't told Mertons or the Guild the reason why, he had flatly refused even to consider returning to such a time. To live through that again burdened with the knowledge of what was to come would destroy him. He'd rather feel the lash of guilt and sorrow in this, the aftermath of his vanity, than to see it coming like a runaway carriage, about to crush him. He gazed at the emerald on his finger as one would a malignant tumor.

Mertons was observing him closely. "Peter, is there anything I should know?"

But Peter hadn't told anyone in the Afterlife about his despair, and he wasn't about to start. "Only that it's been a week, and I told you I would give you two, no more."

Mertons sighed and examined another sheet of paper. "I've reconfirmed the coordinates. There may have been a little trouble with our original calculation, but I can assure you the writer is within striking distance."

Peter had no interest in Mertons's coordinates or any of the dozens of other numbers the man routinely reviewed. "Well, it must end soon. I can't even take a piss without your approval."

"My dear Peter, it is not that I wish to constrain your freedom. As I have explained, it is that the Guild has given us a range of deviation of only plus or minus three point oh six two four seven. That is on average for the entire trip, which means the overages we anticipate with the writer's arrival must be balanced with something approaching zero deviation as we wait now."

"Hang on. Did you say three point oh six two four seven?" Peter scratched at a loose sheet with his quill in a fair imitation of a travel accountant. "No wonder this isn't working. You know I can't work at less than three point oh six two four nine two two."

"Jest if you will," Mertons said icily, "but the limits exist for a reason. Jumps are a risk. We must strive to ensure your days are lived exactly as they were the first time through. Unscrupulous or unthinking trippers could reorder time. We're lucky a novice like you was allowed to attempt it."

"I count my blessings hourly."

"Your intercourse with the rogue will cost us at least five points of deviation, and that's right off the top. Which means the rest of our time here must be kept below two point six." He scribbled on his paper. "Two point seven at the most. How revealing do you intend the intercourse to be?"

Peter considered both the question and Mertons's susceptibility to a double entendre, but abandoned his ambitions and said only, "I shall endeavor to bring it in under five."

"Excellent."

Peter turned his attention to a stack of mezzotints and reached for the pot of ink and his chop.

Mertons caught his sleeve. "What are you doing?"

"Placing my chop--my mark--upon them," Peter said. "They're for the king. Gifts for the envoy from Sicily."

Mertons held tight. "Were these done in your original life?"

"Aye," Peter growled. "I have not forgotten the proscription against new marks."

Mertons pulled a sheet of paper from the sheath and looked at it. "'8 November.'" he read. "'Mezzotints of Charles II: 8'" He scanned the stack of mounted prints, counting, then relaxed. "Leaving a mark in this place--a child, a bride, your name on a painting, anything that was not marked before--will bind you here forever."

"Aye. I remember." Peter shook his arm free. There was no place he'd less like to be bound.

"Your best bet is to stay as close to me as possible. That's why I'm here, Peter. To be your guide."

"As Virgil through the circles of hell."

"And you are certain you recall what you are to do when you finally meet him? Shall I review that as well?"

"No," he said with exquisite politeness, "thank you." He stretched his long legs. Now was the time. "How is my patronage looking, Mertons?"

Peter hadn't been exactly eager to deal with his customers since returning, and the surprise showed on Mertons' face. With a tilt of his head, Mertons peered into the long hallway.

"You have a considerable line out there."

"Excellent," said Peter, who, in fact, couldn't have cared less. "But..."

"But what?"

"I admit I am concerned, most concerned about the appropriateness of each as far as our limits are concerned. Might you be willing to size them up, so to speak, from a jump risk point of view?"

Mertons's forehead creased, and he shuffled through the papers before finding one in particular. "I assume they're the same people you saw when you lived this day in your life before."

"Quite likely, aye." Peter carried the prints to the storage room. "But the point is one can't be sure. We assume the writer will be disguised, but what if there is more than a single man with access to the unsecured time tube? What if there is a conspiracy to unravel the time fabric?"

Mertons paled. "You're right. There's a Robert de Manville on this list here whose name is giving me pause."

"Robert de Manville." Peter frowned. "I don't remember him. Seems a very likely candidate, Mertons."

Mertons sighed. "I explained you wouldn't remember everyone. It is just as if you were seventy, and returned to the neighborhood in which you lived until you were breeked. Some faces you will remember. Some you will not. It is not a reliable means by which to judge. You must exercise caution and foresight at all times--all times, Peter. Give me a moment. I shall examine the group versus the appointments you had for the day from our records and offer you my thinking."

"Take all the time you need."

And Mertons, feeling more than his usual sense of trepidation, did. Though Robert de Manville, upon rigorous cross-examination, proved unremarkable and the woman with the crimson frock and pock marks gave him no pause, the man with the hooded eyes beside her--her husband or at least the man who purported to be--alarmed Mertons almost enough to announce Mr. Lely was accepting no more clients for the day. But he took down a thorough description of the man, so thorough, in fact, the elaborate chime of Peter's Ottoman clock entered his consciousness as only a distant, barely-noticed melody.

When he felt he'd observed enough to make a judgment on the security of the mission, he stepped back into the office and said, "I would like to offer a caution on--Peter?"

The desk was empty, and the door to the storage room was ajar.

"Er, I say, Peter," he called, raising his voice a degree, "I would like to offer a stiff note of caution on a man named John Howell and his wife. I'm not certain, of course, but you must not take risks."

Peter did not reply. Mertons frowned and started toward the room. "Remember, this writer has enough heartless calculation to fool his readers, destroy the reputation of a gifted man and thus far elude the Guild. I would call that more than a temporary irritant, Peter. I would call that"--Mertons entered to find nothing but curtains fluttering at an open window, and his warning sputtered to a close--"a cold-blooded machine."

Chapter Two

There are certain things that drive a woman to immediate action, Campbell Stratford thought. A flesh-cutting pantyhose run is one of them.

"Oh. My. God!" She shoved the manuscripts pages aside, knocking over an Orange Crush with one hand and a three-inch stack of security audit reports with the other, "how did I ever get a grown-up job?"

"Since when is curating a grown-up job?" Jeanne, her assistant and longtime friend, grabbed a nearby napkin.

Campbell found the scissors and flung her leg on the desk. A run the size of the Grand Canyon with the approximate pain-delivery power of an electrified garrote had laddered between her legs and, like Sherman's army, was about to march down her thigh.

"Avert your eyes!" She thrust the blade under the taut nylon lashes and jerked. The pain stopped, but the laddering shot to her knee. "White Out!"

Jeanne hooked the bottle out of her desk organizer with the efficiency of a surgical nurse and lobbed it across the room. "Cam, hurry," she said, glancing down the

hall, "Packard and Ball are on their way to the stairs."

"Crap. Since when is noon 'early afternoon'?" Woodson Ball was the Mount Everest of potential donors, and according to his email to her, he shouldn't have been here until at least one. Cam had planned to use her lunch hour to gobble a hot dog and scour reference books for the one detail about Anthony van Dyck that would make her long-overdue manuscript spark to life. Spark-sourcing at noon. Mountain-climbing at one. Why can't we stick to the schedule, folks? I got a promotion I'm after here.

She whipped the top off the White Out and pulled the brush free, sending a fine spray of white across the year-end pledge report and most of the front of her pencil skirt. Moaning, she applied the ooze to the hole now eating past her knee, then leaned in and blew for all she was worth. "You haven't seen Anastasia, have you?"

"I thought she traveled in a cloud of black smoke. That's quite an image, by the way. It could definitely get you the spotlight on officesluts-dot-com."

"Does it pay anything?" Cam wondered if she'd have time to eat the hot dog as she was racing down to the first floor.

"I find it covers the rent."

Now Cam had a gummy clot of white at the end of a long, pale rectangle of exposed flesh. Actually, what she had was a gummy clot of white, an unfinished manuscript, a big donor who was working on Greenland time, a cutthroat rival with a pick-axe and zip line where you'd expect her heart to be and a desk that smelled like the game room of a Chuck E. Cheese.

No time now. She jumped to her feet and turned. "Does anything show?"

Jeanne frowned. "Depends what you mean by 'anything.' Officesluts would take a

pass, but the folks at Hillbilly Hose are gonna love you."

Cam looked down. Panic was seeping in. The hole in her pantyhose was enormous. She looked like her thigh had been attacked by a meat grinder. What could she do? She looked around the room for potential fixes. A scarf? Too weird. A Sharpie? Too black. Her yoga pants? Too weird and too black. "Jeeaaaaaannnnne!" she wailed. "Help!"

Jeanne sprang into action. She pulled a spray can out of her purse and pulled off the cap. Cam's hands flew up instinctively to cover her eyes. "Mace!"

"Not mace," Jeanne said. "I used it before my date last night. He liked it."

Cam spread her fingers.

"It's foundation." Jeanne said. "Spray on."

"It says 'Spray-On Tan.'"

"Half the price." Jeanne put the can in Cam's hand. "Here."

Cam gazed down uncertainly. That run ran really high. "Er..."

"Just point and shoot. Like a camera."

"I know you're going to find this hard to believe, but I don't actually point a lot of cameras down there." She lifted her leg tentatively and gave the canister a squeeze.

"There. How's that?"

"Great. So long as you're tanning your desk."

Cam looked. The spray had made a happy sunflower shape on the wood. "Oh, man."

"Gimme, gimme, gimme." Jeanne took the can and bent. "I'm expecting to see this reflected in my performance review, by the way."

"Ooh! Felt that one."

"C'mon, you. That's right, that's right. Oh, yeah. Beautiful."

"Er," someone said. "Am I interrupting?"

It was Jacket, Cam's ex-fiancé, in dark jeans and a worn leather jacket, looking as sexy as someone could whom she'd kicked out of her bed six months ago. Sexier, actually, which was not a good sign.

Cam closed her leg, then immediately flung it open. "Still wet."

"I'll bet." He slouched against the door and smiled.

Jeanne gave Cam a private eye roll. "Steady, girl," she said under her breath.

"Jeanne was helping me with a run in my pantyhose."

"Mm."

God, what was it about that gritty London growl? Even an mm sounded like the whirr of some fantastic sex toy. Cam had to be careful. This was how she gotten in trouble in the first place.

"I came by to pick up the spare keys."

Jeanne whipped her gaze in Cam's direction. Jeanne was definitely not a Jacket fan.

"Er, well, it is still half your condo after all," Cam said, more for Jeanne's benefit than for his. "You're in finalizing your stuff for the exhibit. Offering you the guest room seems like the least I could do, right?"

"Still..." He gave her a smoldering look.

"Yes," Jeanne agreed with a look for Cam that far outscorched Jacket's. "Still."

"I, ah, gotta run. The spare keys should be in my purse. Jeanne can give you hers

if you can't find them."

Jeanne gave him a bland look. "She means for her apartment, by the way."

"Hang on." Jacket touched Cam's arm.

She felt a twinge of the old familiar foolishness as well as a tinge of the old familiar despair.

"Can you stay for a minute?" he said.

"Um..." She tried to avoid Jeanne's eye. "Yeah, sure. A minute."

Jeanne found the keys and dropped them into Jacket's hand. "Careful," she said.

"One of them unlocks when it shouldn't." She gave Cam a look and marched out.

Cam immediately wished she wore a different outfit. Nothing screamed needy like navy gabardine and White Out. "What's up?"

"I meant what I said." He pocketed the keys. "That was really nice."

She could smell the faint scent of his skin. She could also smell the Kleenex into which she wept half her body weight last June.

"I brought something for you. I'd call it a peace offering, but it's yours, so it's not, really, but, still, I'd like it if you thought of it that way."

He opened his palm. In it was the ring she'd designed, the ring that had been their engagement ring. Blue-black enamel; a flat, round pearl like the moon and a spattering of diamonds across the wide band like the night sky.

She held up a hand. The last time she'd seen the ring was when she'd cracked his tooth with it that fateful afternoon. Those sorts of memories she could do without. "No, thanks."

"Please," he said. "You loved the ring. I feel bad enough about what happened."

Take it back. Enjoy it. Consider it entirely de-sanctified."

She had loved that ring. And if she hadn't found him in bed with the artist who'd designed it, she would have never let it go.

"I had the guy who repaired it add an extra diamond." He turned the band to show her.

"Repaired it?"

"Tooth mark," he explained.

"Oh, right. Sorry about that."

"Yeah, well..." His eyes went to his boots then back to her. "I deserved it."

"That's for sure."

He laughed and lifted a finger. The ring dangled from a sparkling chain, the way she'd always worn it. Guess he'd had that repaired, too.

"May I?" he said.

Cam considered, then nodded. He came begin her, and she lifted her hair.

Suddenly, the room felt much smaller. He brought the chain around to the front then clasped it behind her.

"Thanks."

He made a low rumble, a cross between a laugh and a sigh.

"I gotta run," she said. True in so many ways.

"What's up?"

"Woodson Ball." Jacket knew him as well as she did. Ball collected a lot of modern art, and Jacket's famous Lucite, fruit and everyday object assemblages had been very collectible once.

"Buying or selling?"

"Giving, I hope. A fantastic van Dyck. Two-point-one million, at least. That is, if I can reel it in. And in time for the appointment of the new Executive Director."

Jacket lifted a brow. "Packard's out?"

Lemont Packard had announced he'd be retiring in six months. The board had just begun the process of interviewing candidates. Both she and Anastasia were being considered. Which is why she needed to sell her manuscript and bring in the biggest gift to the museum this year.

"Yep. Retiring."

He looked at her and smiled. He wasn't tall, but he had the bearing of a double-O spy. Taut, chiseled, ready to act. And, of course, as an artist, that came with an ego the size of the Louvre.

"You'll get it," he said.

"You think?"

"You'd have my vote."

Whoa! Who knew the room could get so small? He was about one tablespoon of nitroglycerin away from blowing the top off a Pandora's Box that had been nailed shut and dipped in steel four months ago. She touched the chain, flustered. "Okay, well, good luck with the condo--"

"Cam?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think, I mean, would it ever be possible for us to try things again?"

Boom! A million feelings exploded in her head. Sorrow, anger, lust, forgiveness,

fear--and hope.

Anger, her ego said firmly.

Hope, her heart replied.

"Jacket..." Her face burned. "I-I don't know."

"I know." He touched her wrist. A crack of lightning shot straight to her belly. The last thing she wanted was her belly weighing in on this. Her belly was a body part of very few words.

Lust.

Lust.

Lust.

Lust.

Cam touched his waist, that hard, hard waist, and he pulled her into a kiss.

Such a bad idea. Such a good bad idea.

Reluctantly, she extricated her mouth. She mouth felt like she'd been sucking lust-flavored Pop Rocks.

"I was thinking you might want to take a short leave of absence."

"A short leave?"

"Or a longer one." He grinned. "Maybe come to London with me for awhile."

Oh, London. She loved London. "I couldn't."

"Anytime. Now, after the gala. To celebrate your new directorship. They let you take a holiday sometimes, don't they?"

He could be very charming when he put his mind to it. Just ask the explosions in her mouth. "I, ah..."

"Cam, I-- Oh, God, sorry."

Jeanne's voice snapped her ego into action. Cam broke away and wiped her mouth, embarrassed. "What's up?"

"Anastasia. On the stairs. In a puff of vampire-colored smoke."