



If We  
Were Villains

*a novel*

M. L. Rio

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*New York Times* bestselling author of *Station Eleven*



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**Villains**



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*For the many weird and wonderful thespians whom I have had the good fortune to call my friends. (I promise this is not about you.)*

# ACT I

## PROLOGUE

I sit with my wrists cuffed to the table and I think, *But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul.* The guard stands by the door, watching me, like he's waiting for something to happen.

Enter Joseph Colborne. He is a graying man now, almost fifty. It's a surprise, every few weeks, to see how much he's aged—and he's aged a little more, every few weeks, for ten years. He sits across from me, folds his hands, and says, "Oliver."

"Joe."

"Heard the parole hearing went your way. Congratulations."

"I'd thank you if I thought you meant it."

"You know I don't think you belong in here."

"That doesn't mean you think I'm innocent."

"No." He sighs, checks his watch—the same one he's worn since we met—as if I'm boring him.

"So why are you here?" I ask. "Same fortnightly reason?"

His eyebrows make a flat black line. "You would say fucking 'fortnight.'"

"You can take the boy out of the theatre, or something like that."

He shakes his head, simultaneously amused and annoyed.

"Well?" I say.

"Well what?"

"*The gallows does well. But how does it well? It does well to those that do ill,*" I reply, determined to deserve his annoyance. "Why are you here? You should know by now I'm not going to tell you anything."

“Actually,” he says, “this time I think I might be able to change your mind.”

I sit up straighter in my chair. “How?”

“I’m leaving the force. Sold out, took a job in private security. Got my kids’ education to think about.”

For a moment I simply stare at him. Colborne, I always imagined, would have to be put down like a savage old dog before he’d leave the chief’s office.

“How’s that supposed to persuade me?” I ask.

“Anything you say will be strictly off the record.”

“Then why bother?”

He sighs again and all the lines on his face deepen. “Oliver, I don’t care about doling out punishment, not anymore. Someone served the time, and we rarely get that much satisfaction in our line of work. But I don’t want to hang up my hat and waste the next ten years wondering what really happened ten years ago.”

I say nothing at first. I like the idea but don’t trust it. I glance around at the grim cinder blocks, the tiny black video cameras that peer down from every corner, the guard with his jutting underbite. I close my eyes, inhale deeply, and imagine the freshness of Illinois springtime, what it will be like to step outside after gasping on stale prison air for a third of my life.

When I exhale I open my eyes and Colborne is watching me closely.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m getting out of here, one way or the other. I don’t want to risk coming back. Seems safer to let sleeping dogs lie.”

His fingers drum restlessly on the table. “Tell me something,” he says. “Do you ever lie in your cell, staring up at the ceiling, wondering how you wound up in here, and you can’t sleep because you can’t stop thinking about that day?”

“Every night,” I say, without sarcasm. “But here’s the difference, Joe. For you it was just one day, then business as usual. For us it was one day, and every single day that came after.” I lean forward on my elbows, so my face is only a few inches from his, so he hears every word when I lower



my voice. “It must eat you alive, not knowing. Not knowing who, not knowing how, not knowing why. But you didn’t know *him*.”

He wears a strange, queasy expression now, as if I’ve become unspeakably ugly and awful to look at. “You’ve kept your secrets all this time,” he says. “It would drive anyone else crazy. Why do it?”

“I wanted to.”

“Do you still?”

My heart feels heavy in my chest. Secrets carry weight, like lead.

I lean back. The guard watches impassively, as if we’re two strangers talking in another language, our conversation distant and insignificant. I think of the others. Once upon a time, *us*. We did wicked things, but they were necessary, too—or so it seemed. Looking back, years later, I’m not so sure they were, and now I wonder: Could I explain it all to Colborne, the little twists and turns and final *exodos*? I study his blank open face, the gray eyes winged now by crow’s-feet, but clear and bright as they have always been.

“All right,” I say. “I’ll tell you a story. But you have to understand a few things.”

Colborne is motionless. “I’m listening.”

“First, I’ll start talking after I get out of here, not before. Second, this can’t come back to me or anyone else—no double jeopardy. And last, it’s not an apology.”

I wait for some response from him, a nod or a word, but he only blinks at me, silent and stoic as a sphinx.

“Well, Joe?” I say. “Can you live with that?”

He gives me a cold sliver of a smile. “Yes, I think I can.”

## SCENE 1

The time: September 1997, my fourth and final year at Dellecher Classical Conservatory. The place: Broadwater, Illinois, a small town of almost no consequence. It had been a warm autumn so far.

Enter the players. There were seven of us then, seven bright young things with wide precious futures ahead of us, though we saw no farther than the books in front of our faces. We were always surrounded by books and words and poetry, all the fierce passions of the world bound in leather and vellum. (I blame this in part for what happened.) The Castle library was an airy octagonal room, walled with bookshelves, crowded with sumptuous old furniture, and kept drowsily warm by a monumental fireplace that burned almost constantly, regardless of the temperature outside. The clock on the mantel struck twelve, and we stirred, one by one, like seven statues coming to life.

“’Tis now dead midnight,” Richard said. He sat in the largest armchair like it was a throne, long legs outstretched, feet propped up on the grate. Three years of playing kings and conquerors had taught him to sit that way in every chair, onstage or off-. “And by eight o’clock tomorrow we must be made immortal.” He closed his book with a snap.

Meredith, curled like a cat on one end of the sofa (while I sprawled like a dog on the other), toyed with one strand of her long auburn hair as she asked, “Where are you going?”

Richard: “*Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed—*”

Filippa: “Spare us.”

Richard: “Early morning and all that.”

Alexander: “He says, as if he’s concerned.”

Wren, sitting cross-legged on a cushion by the hearth and oblivious to the others' bickering, said, "Have you all picked your pieces? I can't decide."

Me: "What about Isabella? Your Isabella's excellent."

Meredith: "*Measure*'s a comedy, you fool. We're auditioning for *Caesar*."

"I don't know why we bother auditioning at all." Alexander—slumped over the table, wallowing in the darkness at the back of the room—reached for the bottle of Scotch at his elbow. He refilled his glass, took one huge gulp, and grimaced at the rest of us. "I could cast the whole bastard thing right now."

"How?" I asked. "I never know where I'll end up."

"That's because they always cast you last," Richard said, "as whatever happens to be left over."

"Tsk-tsk," Meredith said. "Are we Richard tonight or are we Dick?"

"Ignore him, Oliver," James said. He sat by himself in the farthest corner, loath to look up from his notebook. He had always been the most serious student in our year, which (probably) explained why he was also the best actor and (certainly) why no one resented him for it.

"There." Alexander had unfolded a wad of ten-dollar bills from his pocket and was counting them out on the table. "That's fifty dollars."

"For what?" Meredith said. "You want a lap dance?"

"Why, are you practicing for after graduation?"

"Bite me."

"Ask nicely."

"Fifty dollars for what?" I said, keen to interrupt. Meredith and Alexander had by far the foulest mouths among the seven of us, and took a perverse kind of pride in out-cussing each other. If we let them, they'd go at it all night.

Alexander tapped the stack of tens with one long finger. "I bet fifty dollars I can call the cast list right now and not be wrong."

Five of us exchanged curious glances; Wren was still frowning into the fireplace.

“All right, let’s hear it,” Filippa said, with a wan little sigh, as though her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

Alexander pushed his unruly black curls back from his face and said, “Well, obviously Richard will be Caesar.”

“Because we all secretly want to kill him?” James asked.

Richard arched one dark eyebrow. “*Et tu, Bruté?*”

“*Sic semper tyrannis,*” James said, and drew the tip of his pen across his throat like a dagger. *Thus always to tyrants.*

Alexander gestured from one of them to the other. “Exactly,” he said. “James will be Brutus because he’s always the good guy, and I’ll be Cassius because I’m always the bad guy. Richard and Wren can’t be married because that would be gross, so she’ll be Portia, Meredith will be Calpurnia, and Pip, you’ll end up in drag again.”

Filippa, more difficult to cast than Meredith (the femme fatale) or Wren (the ingénue), was obliged to cross-dress whenever we ran out of good female parts—a common occurrence in the Shakespearean theatre. “Kill me,” she said.

“Wait,” I said, effectively proving Richard’s hypothesis that I was a permanent leftover in the casting process, “where does that leave me?”

Alexander studied me with narrowed eyes, running his tongue across his teeth. “Probably as Octavius,” he decided. “They won’t make you Antony—no offense, but you’re just not *conspicuous* enough. It’ll be that insufferable third-year, what’s his name?”

Filippa: “Richard the Second?”

Richard: “Hilarious. No, Colin Hyland.”

“Spectacular.” I looked down at the text of *Pericles* I was scanning, for what felt like the hundredth time. Only half as talented as any of the rest of them, I seemed doomed to always play supporting roles in someone else’s story. Far too many times I had asked myself whether art was imitating life or if it was the other way around.

Alexander: “Fifty bucks, on that exact casting. Any takers?”

Meredith: “No.”

Alexander: “Why not?”

Filippa: “Because that’s precisely what’ll happen.”

Richard chuckled and climbed out of his chair. “One can only hope.” He started toward the door and leaned over to pinch James’s cheek on his way out. “*Goodnight, sweet prince—*”

James smacked Richard’s hand away with his notebook, then made a show of disappearing behind it again. Meredith echoed Richard’s laugh and said, “*Thou art as hot a Jack in thy mood as any in Italy!*”

“*A plague o’ both your houses,*” James muttered.

Meredith stretched—with a small, suggestive groan—and pushed herself off the couch.

“Coming to bed?” Richard asked.

“Yes. Alexander’s made all this work seem rather pointless.” She left her books scattered on the low table in front of the fire, her empty wineglass with them, a crescent of lipstick clinging to the rim. “Goodnight,” she said, to the room at large. “Godspeed.” They disappeared down the hall together.

I rubbed my eyes, which were beginning to burn from the effort of reading for hours on end. Wren tossed her book backward over her head, and I started as it landed beside me on the couch.

Wren: “To hell with it.”

Alexander: “That’s the spirit.”

Wren: “I’ll just do Isabella.”

Filippa: “Just go to bed.”

Wren stood slowly, blinking the vestigial light of the fire out of her eyes. “I’ll probably lie awake all night reciting lines,” she said.

“Want to come out for a smoke?” Alexander had finished his whiskey (again) and was rolling a spliff on the table. “Might help you relax.”

“No, thank you,” she said, drifting out into the hall. “Goodnight.”

“Suit yourself.” Alexander pushed his chair back, spliff poking out of one corner of his mouth. “Oliver?”

“If I help you smoke that I’ll wake up with no voice tomorrow.”

“Pip?”

She nudged her glasses up into her hair and coughed softly, testing her throat. “God, you’re a terrible influence,” she said. “Fine.”

He nodded, already halfway out of the room, hands buried deep in his pockets. I watched them go, a little jealously, then slumped down against the arm of the couch. I struggled to focus on my text, which was so aggressively annotated that it was barely legible anymore.

PERICLES: *Antioch, farewell! for wisdom sees those men  
Blush not in actions blacker than the night  
Will ’schew no course to keep them from the light.  
One sin, I know, another doth provoke;  
Murder’s as near to lust as flame to smoke.*

I murmured the last two lines under my breath. I knew them by heart, had known them for months, but the fear that I would forget a word or phrase halfway through my audition gnawed at me anyway. I glanced across the room at James and said, “Do you ever wonder if Shakespeare knew these speeches half as well as we do?”

He withdrew from whatever verse he was reading, looked up, and said, “Constantly.”

I cracked a smile, vindicated just enough. “Well, I give up. I’m not actually getting anything done.”

He checked his watch. “No, I don’t think I am either.”

I heaved myself off the sofa and followed James up the spiral stairs to the bedroom we shared—which was directly over the library, the highest of three rooms in a little stone column commonly referred to as the Tower. It had once been used only as an attic, but the cobwebs and clutter had been cleared away to make room for more students in the late seventies. Twenty years later it housed James and me, two beds with blue Dellecher

bedspreads, two monstrous old wardrobes, and a pair of mismatched bookshelves too ugly for the library.

“Do you think it’ll fall out how Alexander says?” I asked.

James pulled his shirt off, mussing his hair in the process. “If you ask me, it’s too predictable.”

“When have they ever surprised us?”

“Frederick surprises me all the time,” he said. “But Gwendolyn will have the final say, she always does.”

“If it were up to her, Richard would play all of the men and half the women.”

“Which would leave Meredith playing the other half.” He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. “When do you read tomorrow?”

“Right after Richard. Filippa’s after me.”

“And I’m after her. God, I feel bad for her.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a wonder she hasn’t dropped out.”

James frowned thoughtfully as he wriggled out of his jeans. “Well, she’s a bit more resilient than the rest of us. Maybe that’s why Gwendolyn torments her.”

“Just because she can take it?” I said, discarding my own clothes in a pile on the floor. “That’s cruel.”

He shrugged. “That’s Gwendolyn.”

“If I had my way, I’d turn it all upside down,” I said. “Make Alexander Caesar and have Richard play Cassius instead.”

He folded his comforter back and asked, “Am I still Brutus?”

“No.” I tossed a sock at him. “You’re Antony. For once I get to be the lead.”

“Your time will come to be the tragic hero. Just wait for spring.”

I glanced up from the drawer I was pawing through. “Has Frederick been telling you secrets again?”

He lay down and folded his hands behind his head. “He may have mentioned *Troilus and Cressida*. He has this fantastic idea to do it as a battle of the sexes. All the Trojans men, all the Greeks women.”

“That’s insane.”

“Why? That play is as much about sex as it is about war,” he said. “Gwendolyn will want Richard to be Hector, of course, but that makes you Troilus.”

“Why on earth wouldn’t *you* be Troilus?”

He shifted, arched his back. “I may have mentioned that I’d like to have a little more variety on my résumé.”

I stared at him, unsure if I should be insulted.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said, a low note of reproach in his voice. “He agreed we all need to break out of our boxes. I’m tired of playing fools in love like Troilus, and I’m sure you’re tired of always playing the sidekick.”

I flopped on my bed on my back. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” For a moment I let my thoughts wander, and then I breathed out a laugh.

“Something funny?” James asked, as he reached over to turn out the light.

“You’ll have to be Cressida,” I told him. “You’re the only one of us pretty enough.”

We lay there laughing in the dark until we dropped off to sleep, and slept deeply, with no way of knowing that the curtain was about to rise on a drama of our own invention.