







# The Duke's Bride Vanishes (The Secret Lives of Regency Ladies #1)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Rumors have flown for years.

That has ruined scores of enemies.

Broken just as many hearts.

Lost an eye in a duel.

Murdered his first wife.

The Beast of Blackflint is a monster out of a fairy tale.

Arabella Dentons father just negotiated his most ambitious deal: marrying her to a duke. Unfortunately, that man is Nicholas Alberlefifteen years her senior, powerful, cold, scarred, and terrifying. Worse, their wedding will mean the end of Arabellas secret life as one of Londons most promising artists.

Nick knows what he needs: a wife who will give him an heir without capturing his interest, imagination, or heart. Shy Arabella seems perfect. Until she vanishes from their betrothal dinner. Running from him into a raging, deadly storm.

When Nick goes after Arabella, what unfolds is a night neither predicted. A singular night of accusation, of truths never before confessed and unexpected, searing passion, for as long as the storm might last.

The Dukes Bride Vanishes is a novella-length Regency Romance. For those seeking a content warning, please be aware that characters make mention of serious subjects including abuse and suicide.

**Total Pages (Source):** 14

# Page 1

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London

June 2, 1818

At least thirty men had shown up to Michel Allard's studio that evening. They stood at their easels with shirtsleeves rolled up, smoking cheroots, drinking cheap wine, and verbally sparring with each other as they moved their eyes with shocking casualness over the naked woman whose voluptuous buttocks they'd been tasked with painstakingly reproducing in charcoal, ink, watercolor, and oil.

Six women were in attendance that night, as well. One was herself a model, wrapped in a velvet robe, scowling at her canvas and passing a chipped teacup of whiskey back and forth with her neighbor, a woman of perhaps thirty-five in simple shopgirl attire. Another of the women—the respect Monsieur Allard and his students had for her was evident in the way they joked bawdily with her—was a butchers' widow of fifty. And there were two sisters, both from the theater, always in competition with each other; one broody and precise with her brush, the other effusive, somehow managing to make even a humble bunch of grapes appear positively debauched.

While a few of the men were aristocratic second sons and the like, none of the women originated anywhere near the upper classes. Of course not. This was not a place for a gently bred lady. The nudity, the vulgarity, the strong spirits, the frank talk of tits and cocks and cunts in the context of chiaroscuro, the lateness of the hour. And, of course, all those men.

And then there were the works in progress scattered about the back wall of the studio. Nothing a lady would ever see in her lifetime, save if she took a very wrong turn

indeed on the way to the museum. Provocative nudes. Scenes of implied and explicit carnality. And, perhaps even more controversially, scenes of life in the poorest slums of London. Hollow-eyed children. Scarred, alcoholic men. Women old before their time. Even the artists' rudimentary self-portraits were more searching, intimate, and inventive than anything that would hang in a gallery patronized by a fine young lady.

Understandable, then, that Arabella Denton had arrived tonight wearing her former lady's maid's old woolen dress. She'd scraped her hair back in a simple, unflattering bun. She kept her eyes on her canvas and on the model only, ignoring the conversations buzzing all around her. If she joined in, they'd hear the poshness of her accent within ten words, she knew.

Arabella had made sure no one knew she was coming, of course. And, she'd reasoned, simply popping in to observe a class in the studio of a well-known painter, a class attended by accomplished artists—of both sexes, after all—could hardly rise to the level of real scandal. Surely?

Well, wouldn't have risen to that level. Till now.

Stepping through the half-hidden door to the candlelit back room, Arabella knew she was crossing a point of no return.

The invitation to tonight's class had been a surprise. Two weeks ago, Arabella had accompanied her dear friend Grace Chetwood to the opening of a gallery exhibition of Monsieur Allard's work. Allard had, over the past few years, painted portraits of the whole Chetwood family, to fine effect. Allard was a particular favorite of the ton, owing to his brush's ability to subtly flatter his subjects. A sea of ladies and gentlemen were in attendance.

Arabella had taken a small sketchbook, as she did whenever she visited a gallery or museum. Even as a small girl, she'd loved to draw. Loved it in a way so deep and

fundamental that she didn't think of it as love. She simply thought of it as being the most herself she could be.

Arabella lingered over one portrait, studying a peculiar, hard-to-define look in the baroness's eye. It was something warm, something ... secret. Arabella wanted to remember that look, even as she pondered that she did not quite understand it. And so she pulled out her sketchbook and a pencil, retreated to a quiet corner, and sketched what she saw.

She was absorbed in her work and did not notice Allard's approach. He cleared his throat, eyeing her work from over her shoulder. Embarrassed, she snapped the book shut.

"Beg pardon," he said, and bowed. He was a fashionable Frenchman of around forty years, with wild, too-long hair, an elegant nose reddened by years of drink, and a way of leaning against a wall that made one feel he was interacting with the world ironically.

He introduced himself. Arabella felt herself blush. "I know your work well. I've seen it in many galleries and homes over the years. It is so beautiful—the brushwork, the expression. Truly."

He touched his hand to his heart. "This means much, from a fellow artist."

"Oh, I'm not —"

"Nonsense." He nodded to her shut book.

"All ladies draw," she protested.

"Draw kittens," he said, with amused disdain. "And not well. You are different."

“And you perceive that I am different ... from a quick glance at a sketch?”

He shrugged. “It is my work to know.”

Arabella’s heart gave a little flip. No one paid her art any mind—not her father, certainly, or her friends. Hearing praise from an artist she admired thrilled her.

“You should study,” he said.

“Oh, I had a tutor.”

“Horseshit. You should study . Come to my course.”

Oh . She knew about his classes, taught in his studio in a vibrant, dilapidated area of London. Promising young painters gathered to learn technique, and sketch from live models. Nude models, many recruited from neighborhood brothels.

Aristocrats and working-class young men alike gathered for these sessions. Art was the great leveler, the eradicator of class.

Well, for men, it was. No gently bred lady would attend a such a gathering, any more than she would set foot in a harem.

“Women attend,” he said, with a smile, seeming to read Arabella’s mind.

“I couldn’t possibly,” she said.

He held his hand out, asking for the sketchbook. Surprised, she handed it to him. He flipped through, scanning her other work. He nodded approvingly.

“Much promise. As I said, mademoiselle . You should come.” He held his hand out

again and she realized he wanted the pencil. He used it to write down an address and time.

“If you change your mind.” He handed the book back to her. “Please know, my students and I would be the soul of discretion. We serve the muse. Not the ton.”

With an amused tilt of his head, the artist walked away.

Arabella had gleaned all she could from her childhood art tutor, and had been relying for some time on solitary close study of musty paintings in museums, trying her best to decipher the elements of good technique. So the class was wonderful. No—exhilarating. Magical. To work alongside so many talented artists, to hear Allard’s explanations and suggestions ... bliss.

Oh, and the studio. It was cluttered, dusty, unevenly lit, with a frightful number of wine bottles scattered about. It was heaven.

Arabella hoped she blended in, that the others assumed she was household staff, or a shopgirl, or really anything other than the daughter of a lord. Thankfully, no one paid her attention. All were absorbed in their own work. The atmosphere was friendly but serious, even as wine loosened tongues and the evening wore on.

Arabella made several sketches of two female models in turn. One was slender, as vibrantly red-haired as her friend Grace, with freckles everywhere on her body. The other, impossibly voluptuous—even her curly black hair was alive with sensual movement.

When the third model stepped up and disrobed, Arabella had to stifle a gasp. A man of perhaps five and twenty stood before her, with the physique of a Greek statue—all perfect skin, smooth muscle, a thatch of golden hair over a thick penis that lay against his upper thigh as he posed.



She'd seen men naked before, of course. It was difficult to entirely avoid them when one visited lakes where people swam, and so forth.

But they certainly didn't tend to look like Apollo come to life.

Sketching the model felt wrong, initially. Almost as though she were touching his naked form.

But then, abruptly, it felt as natural as breathing. Even his penis stopped being a curiosity and turned to shape, shadow, light.

Allard peered at her work. Suggested she deepen the shadows. "Less timid." He clapped her on the shoulder before moving on to the next student. "Very good," he said as he went.

Arabella quietly beamed.

The hour grew late. Several students bade their goodbyes and departed. And those who stayed gradually abandoned their work and turned their full attention to drinking and socializing.

Arabella briefly considered slipping away. Her father didn't know she was here, of course. He believed she was visiting with Grace, who had agreed to conceal her adventure.

Technically, she could stay here as long as she liked. But she had the sense that the class was over, and if she remained here, it would be for another reason entirely.

She noticed then that several more students were missing from the room. And that a few new artists had entered the studio, bringing wine and conversation with them as they greeted friends and passed through the space. And then she saw where they were

going—through a door semi-concealed by a shabby velvet curtain. She took a step closer, and heard murmurs, laughter, and strange sounds she could not place on the other side of the door.

It is time to go, she thought, gathering up her sketchbook.

But she did not walk to the exit. She approached the door.

The room was larger than Arabella expected, lit here and there by candles shoved into empty bottles. A sort of lounging room, with various arrangements of settees, paint-spattered chairs, piles of threadbare cushions on the ground.

The first thing she saw was a student, sketching. He was sitting on a stool, near a chair where a fellow student with an unkempt head of flaxen hair sat, his head thrown back.

For a moment, Arabella thought she'd simply walked into another version of the class she'd just left.

But then the man on the chair moaned.

And all at once Arabella realized he was not alone. The slender, redheaded model knelt on the floor between his legs. She was topless, her pale, freckled breasts pressed against his legs. She'd pulled his cock from his pants and was stroking it with long, firm movements, a smirk on her face as he reacted.

That's what the student was drawing.

Arabella took a step backward. She'd never seen anything like it. Well, once, in a book Grace had pilfered from her father's library. But those had been ridiculous caricatures.

This . . . was the thing itself.

As she backed toward the door, she realized that it was everywhere in the room. She was surrounded by similar couplings. Another female painter, one of the sisters, sat in the lap of a man at least ten years her senior, straddling his legs. Her skirts were pulled up to her waist, revealing plump legs in practical woolen stockings, and she was moving on him almost lazily. Her breathing was uneven. She stared into the man's eyes, and Arabella could see that they were in their own world. He murmured something to her in French. She laughed throatily and leaned in to kiss him.

Beyond that couple, Arabella saw two men on a couch, one kissing his way down the other's body, unbuttoning his clothes as he went.

Arabella felt frozen to the spot. Seeing something—so many things—she was never meant to see.

She'd wondered, of course. About all of it. What a man looked like in an aroused state. What a woman did with a man. And the men together—that was something she'd never even thought to wonder about.

She knew that everything she was seeing was a transgression. But in this room, it didn't seem so—in fact, it seemed quite ordinary to everyone involved.

And more than that. Arabella knew she should feel disgust at the array of lascivious acts playing out around her. But instead, they seem to have shaken the lid off something deep in her belly, and now a great many butterflies were flitting around inside her.

She wanted to move closer.

Another student—young, handsome, quite tall—had noticed Arabella hovering near

the door. He stepped beside her, and for a moment, watched the room with her. Her shoulder, so near his, went warm.

He dipped his head and murmured in her ear. “Are you only watching, sweetheart? Or ... ?”

The invitation shimmered in the air between them.

Her heart gave a thump. She was intrigued. And afraid. And most of all, overwhelmed. She’d barely seen anything yet, and it felt very bold to jump into the fray with so little knowledge.

“In a little while, perhaps,” she managed. He tipped his head in friendly deference and moved on.

Arabella found a dark corner with cushions on the floor. It offered her a clear view of the whole room, and she doubted anyone would notice her there. She made herself comfortable, took up her sketchbook ... and watched.

An hour went by. An expanding, many-layered universe of pleasure unfurling all around her. Sometimes, she got so caught up in the rawness of the moment that she forgot she was drawing. She filled many pages with quick sketches, gestures.

Eventually, she grew bolder. Most of the others in the room were quite drunk by then, and some of the couples had become trios and quartets. Entwined shamelessly. The room filled with the sounds of bodies meeting, of overwhelming pleasure. Arabella abandoned her corner and came closer to the action—the subjects, as she was dryly referring to them in her head.

She sat on the floor, pencil flying over the page, eyes glued to Allard’s tongue as it drew quick spirals over the voluptuous model’s rosy cunt. The model lay back on a

pile of pillows, arching, writhing, grabbing his hair so hard that it surely hurt, though he didn't complain. He merely pressed into her with his tongue, gripping her hips in his charcoal-stained fingers.

Arabella felt her insides go liquid as she watched the model approach ecstasy under Allard's mouth. And then, the woman rolled her head to the side ... and saw Arabella watching.

Arabella looked away, embarrassed ... but when she looked back, the woman was still looking at her. With a private smile.

The woman held Arabella's gaze as Allard deftly rolled his tongue over her. The woman gasped, and, staring right into Arabella's eyes, came with a feral moan.

Arabella realized she was breathing so hard she was very nearly panting. One of her hands had somehow come to rest on her breast. In that instant, she very, very much wanted to push her other hand between her legs. She wanted someone to throw her skirts up, do to her what Allard had done to the model. She wanted someone to stare into her eyes as she reached ecstasy.

It was like she'd spoken the wish aloud. Because languorously, the model sat up and leaned toward Arabella, nudging Allard to get his attention. "Come join us," the woman said, her voice honey, breathless, infinitely inviting.

Allard looked to Arabella with drunken fondness, then bit the model's thigh. "Leave the girl alone, cherie, she's shy."

"I'm not so sure she is," the model said, and gave Arabella a challenging look. "Are you shy?"

And in that moment, Arabella was both grateful and regretful that she had not drunk

any wine. So nothing impeded the voice of reason from propelling her to her feet, grabbing up her sketchbook ... and running out of the room as fast as she could.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

Blackflint Estate

March , 820

Arabella smiled her brightest smile, and prayed that she wouldn't be sick. Not while the wealthiest and most powerful eyes in England were on her.

The dinner party had been her father's idea. He never missed the opportunity to mix business with, well, anything, and he knew that announcing his daughter's betrothal to no less than a duke would put many a prospective investor in just the spirit to hear his latest scheme.

Lord Edward Denton had amassed his fortune—he was, these days, very rich indeed—from deals with far less savory associates than the ones in attendance tonight. In his youth as heir to a scandalized and impoverished barony, not many in the upper crust were quick to join his endeavors. But now, he could not be more legitimate.

Arabella could almost be proud of his grit, all these years of climbing his way to the highest reaches of society. If only these luminaries knew how underhanded and criminal he truly remained. That was her father: ruthlessly adept and working every angle at once.

Or perhaps they did know he was a liar, and greedy, and untrustworthy, and they simply didn't care, because he turned them a tidy profit ... and because his daughter was about to become a duchess.

Through Arabella, and the growing fleet of cargo ships he'd accumulated in the past years, Lord Denton was going to get absolutely everything he dreamed of. Entree into any room in England. Connections on three continents. And who could have predicted that his mouse of a daughter, whose existence he'd barely acknowledged with anything but irritation for over two decades, would deliver his dream?

Arabella did not wish to marry a duke. She did not wish to marry at all. And she wished to marry Nicholas Alberle, Duke of Blackflint, least of all.

Sitting beside the man throughout dinner had been like sitting beside a stone. A monument to the cold and unknowable.

Well, he moved, he talked, just ... not to her, and always in that smooth, cool tone. He'd been absorbed in conversation with the men at the table, only looking in her general direction when absolutely necessary.

And what she saw in his face when he did look at her was ... nothing. A polite curtain drawn over all thought and feeling. If he had feelings. He met her eyes with a disconcerting, unreadable placidity.

It probably didn't help that he had but one of his own—eyes. Rumors varied widely as to how he had lost the other: duel, drunken rampage, set upon by cutthroats. He wore a black silk eyepatch, tied around his head with thin black ribbon. A raised white ladder of a scar trailed from beneath the patch like a vicious tear down his cheek, where it stopped a few inches from the corner of his mouth.

This is how Arabella knew for certain that her father did not love her. No man who cared could serve her up to the Beast of Blackflint.

True, there was an elegance to the duke. His manners were impeccable. His clothes—all shades of charcoal and night—were simpler than the fashion all around



him and spoke of a man who did not care to show off. But one could see how finely chosen and tailored it all was. And all that darkness set off the salting of silver at the temples of his near-black hair to striking effect. Though that only served to remind Arabella that at his advanced age—seven and thirty years to her two and twenty—they were bound to have nothing in common.

And even if there was something they shared, how could she possibly find it when he showed her nothing?

She watched from under her lashes as the Duke of Blackflint conversed with an earl seated nearby. He never raised his voice, never rushed.

That was true power, Arabella supposed. To speak quietly in any room and always be heard.

She watched him lift his wineglass to his lips. His hand was strong but careful around the delicate glass in a way that gave her a strange feeling.

She'd been hearing the stories for years, whispered by giddy friends.

That he'd financially ruined scores of enemies.

That he'd murdered his first wife.

That a married marchioness had fallen so in love with him that when he coldly broke off the affair, she took to her bed for a year .

That the husband of another conquest called him out—and he shot not only the man, but also his second.

That his skin under his fine clothes was as destroyed with scars as his left cheek.

The Beast of Blackflint was a monster out of a fairy tale.

Arabella thought ruefully of her younger self. How excessively silly she'd been. All the cautionary stories about the duke had worked a perverse effect on her mind. She knew she should be repulsed. But instead, she found the man hopelessly intriguing. Foolish, she knew, even at fifteen—but what harm in watching a gentleman at a ball from afar? Or fantasizing about what it might be like to speak with him? Dance with him? Walk in a garden ... and be kissed by him?

It would never happen in life. Fantasies were just that.

What an idiot I was.

The Duke of Blackflint first spoke to Arabella on a summer day seven years ago. He'd come to discuss business with her father—a proposal he'd turned down, leaving Denton in a foul mood for weeks.

She'd been sitting under a tree with her sketchpad. By then, she went nowhere without it. That day, she was drawing the house, idly. She'd drawn it a thousand times. When she felt the hair on her neck prickle. A shadow fell over the page.

When she turned, she gasped.

Him.

How strange to be so close to the dark figure who had so fascinated her. Her flustered heart skipped a heart.

Her gasp caused the duke to step back with an ironic little bow. "Did not mean to frighten," he said, in a voice tinged with cold. As if to say, how disappointing that you shrink back in horror. What a child you are.

She wanted to protest—it wasn't the eyepatch, wasn't the scarring. It was the legend, and her fanciful imagination, and also, in this moment ... everything about him. His size, his broad-shouldered, lean solidity, his watchfulness. He exuded the lazy grace of a predatory animal. Of course she'd gasped.

"Good day," he said, all politeness. And walked away.

She realized she'd been holding her breath, and let it go.

She'd seen him only from afar since then, at the theater or other public events. She found herself staring, but that was nothing odd. Everyone was curious about the enigmatic duke.

When, this past year, he began to visit her father more frequently, he walked past her with barely a glance. He never tried to speak with her.

But then came the day her father smiled at her over breakfast. And said he had very good news indeed. Her stomach dipped. Because she had a feeling she'd been—no sense mincing words— sold .

Perhaps that was unfair. Marriage was marriage. Families used women to make alliances, to secure funds and land and loyalty. Why would hers be any different?

The duke had come that very afternoon. Asked her to take the air with him in the garden. She'd worn her finest day dress, blue to match her eyes. Her maid had perfected the curls in her upswept, blond hair and pinched her cheeks to rosiness. She wore her late mother's diamond teardrop pendant.

And the duke barely looked at her.

He wasn't rude, precisely. In fact, he was solicitous, even charming as they walked,

commenting on the fine weather.

“I think you may be aware of the reason I’ve asked for your time today,” he’d finally said, in that smooth, low voice.

She nodded, swallowed, threw him a smile she hoped didn’t look nervous.

“I am in need of a duchess. It is past time to see to my succession,” he said.

They didn’t know one another. Sentimentality would have been ridiculous. And yet, she felt a pang of disappointment at the practicality of his tone.

“Your every need would be seen to. Your allowance would be generous. Certain events would require our attendance, but outside of those and the requirements of children, I would not impose upon you in any way.”

He said it all so politely. Even the way he said requirements of children spoke volumes. He was telling her he would only visit her bed as necessary, and require no other companionship.

But before Arabella could contemplate what this might look like, he said the thing that dashed her hopes.

“You would live with me, at my estate a few miles outside the city, until such time as you fell pregnant,” he said. “The children are to be born and raised in the countryside. My estate is very private. I know you enjoy painting, and that landscape is rich with appropriate subjects for a lady’s work. Your father tells me you are disinterested in the whirl of society, that you are a quiet and introspective person. I believe life there would suit.”

He’d said a lot. She realized her mouth was slightly open, and shut it.

“What a generous offer,” she finally said. “I am surprised to hear you’ve thought of my little hobby of sketching and would bother to mention it.”

He looked at her with an expression she couldn’t read at all. It was penetrating, and somehow searching.

But his voice when he spoke was cool and detached. “I want my duchess to be contented.”

Something passed between them then. For a moment, Arabella thought she could read a complicated emotion in his features—some mix of nostalgia and regret.

“May I . . . ask a question, Your Grace?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Do you not wish for a love match?”

Whatever hint of feeling she thought she saw in the duke, that door slammed shut. His face went neutral. His deep green eye as devoid of warmth as the patch over the other.

“I do not,” he said. “And my marriage will not be that. Something for you to consider.”

Arabella did not want to marry a man made of ice.

And more than that, she did not want to live out her years caring for babies in luxurious exile. She had dreams for herself, impractical and inappropriate dreams that she nonetheless could not shake. They involved painting, yes—but not the frivolous things ladies in the countryside were free to paint.

In fact, the moment she'd heard him utter the phrase appropriate subjects, she knew: he would never let her be what she wanted to be.

But her father had brokered this. Whatever the details of their deal, a number of ships, a complicated import/export deal, and vast potential profit were involved. The bride's wishes were the least important aspect of the endeavor.

This was the purpose for which she was born. Blackflint had proposed as though it were possible that she would refuse him. It was not possible. Her father would kill her.

She took a deep breath, smiled the warmest smile in her arsenal, and nodded demurely. "I would be honored to be your wife, Your Grace."

Something seemed to crack in the center of her chest. Her heart, presumably.

Arabella had come to this dinner tonight hoping to form a more complete picture of her future husband. To get some sense of who and what he was. To discern whether any softness lay under that precise, cool exterior.

Unfortunately, the duke seemed to be cold all the way through.

And then there was the way people watched him. She was continually reminded that everyone was afraid of the man. It may have fueled her girlish infatuation. But it did not thrill her to consider the reality of marrying such a man.

Thank goodness her friend Grace was in attendance tonight with her parents. Grace, in a mildly overdesigned coppery gown to match her hair and frame her generous endowments, periodically caught Arabella's eye from down the long table, sending mischievous looks in reference to the behavior of other guests. When a gentleman seated near her belched loudly, Grace widened her eyes at Arabella, trying not to

laugh.

Then, just as quickly, the mirth fell from Grace's face, and, with a dart of her eyes to Arabella's left, she looked down at her food. Arabella looked to her left—to the duke. And saw him watching Grace with a placid look that somehow managed to convey vast disdain for her childishness.

Arabella looked away. She could not think about it. Her future husband's opinion of her dearest friend. The reality that if he chose, he could control when or if Arabella saw her. He could control everything.

When Arabella stole another glance, the duke was looking elsewhere, and though she could not precisely say that his expression had changed, something in his demeanor had shifted. She followed the line of his gaze to her cousin Philip, who had just knocked over his wineglass and was now making jokes as a servant dashed to clean up. Everyone around him was laughing.

Arabella saw the duke's brow knit. A knowing dawning in his gaze. If he were anyone else, Arabella would say he was watching with compassion. Sadness, even.

Philip, seated beside his eminently poised wife Catherine, had always been the most dashing member of her extended family. Carefree, stylish, whip-quick with a retort, eventual high ambitions in politics. He'd spent most of his thirties adventuring to far-off lands, then writing about it; his ability to tell a gripping tale was legendary.

Arabella had noticed, of late, that Philip was thinner. Tired, and pretending he wasn't. She had asked him if he was well, and he'd scoffed and turned it into a jape. Finally, she'd overheard her father speaking with Philip's father. The doctors had discovered something—Arabella was unclear on the affliction—and at best, Philip would slowly become more disabled. No one else was to know. Philip's pride would not tolerate it. Even his own wife was largely in the dark.

Philip was in fine form tonight, though she imagined he might pay for it later. Absolutely no one at the table would have guessed he was struggling.

Well, except one.

Arabella dared look fully at the duke, now. Trying to understand. Did she have the coldness wrong? Had she misread him?

He turned to her. Fixed her with a patient, neutral gaze. It reminded her of a garden snake. Emotionless. At perfect, cold ease. Until, of course, there was reason to strike.

Whatever she'd seen when he watched Philip, she must have imagined it.

When Arabella excused herself to freshen up, Grace followed. As soon as they were out of earshot of the party, Grace grabbed both Arabella's hands, her eyes round moons.

"He's so cold," Grace whispered. "I hadn't credited the rumors, but I do think he is capable of it—what he did to his wife. Arie, you cannot. He will hurt you."

"Let us refrain from dramatics," Arabella said tartly, because if she allowed herself to feel what Grace was saying, she'd crumble.

"He doesn't even look at you."

"I haven't given him cause to."

"You are radiantly beautiful, and you are to be his wife. Is there a better reason on earth?"

Arabella laughed, but she did not feel a mote of mirth.



“Arie, I didn’t want to say, but I heard from my brother that it’s true. Blackflint got the scars in a duel—he had taken a man’s wife and misused her. The man called him out ... he killed the man and his second. He ...” Grace stepped closer. “Clara told me he had an affair with her cousin Fanny.”

“The one married to the thousand-year-old corpse?”

Grace nodded with a short laugh. “Clara ... saw marks on Fanny. On her wrists, and ...” Grace was utterly serious, now. Pale at the thought. “We must do something.”

“What do you suggest?” Arabella asked. “Should I run off into the woods?”

“Of course not, you’d be mad.” It seemed to hit her then that her concern was actively unhelpful to Arabella. Grace had no plan, no solution to this problem. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make it worse. I just wish there was something I could do for you.”

“This is our lot. To marry. I shall make the best of it. You know me well,” Arabella said, warmly. “I can usually figure things out.”

Grace smiled uncertainly, and nodded.

The truth was, Arabella had already figured it out.

Running was exactly what she planned to do.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

It had been sound, truly. The plan. If Arabella followed the outskirts of the tree line away from Blackflint's estate, she'd meet a road two miles from the edge of the property. A mile or so more, and she'd come to a farm. She would hide in the stable till daylight, then walk to the nearest inn, where she'd pay for a ride to London. From there, dressed as a governess and armed with a fake letter of reference, she'd make her way to Paris.

She'd change her name. And start her life.

If she was being honest, the threat of violence wasn't what scared her most about the duke. She didn't relish the thought of it, of course.

No. It was that he meant to lock her away in a comfortable, idyllic, soul-throttling countryside cage.

It wasn't balls she wanted, or important friends, or the latest gown. Quite the opposite—she didn't care about those at all. What she wanted, needed, was access to her life. Her real life. The one she'd carefully hidden from her father and everyone for the past year. Slipping away to Michel Allard's London studio, and, despite always departing before the crowd began to drift toward the back room, painting things that would turn the Beast of Blackflint pale.

Retrieving her bag from the carriage went perfectly to plan. No one saw her. She slipped away and ducked into the woods, changing into boots and donning a thick woolen cloak and fur-lined gloves before starting her trek just inside the edge of the tree line. She even had the thought that it wasn't nearly so cold as she'd expected.

And then things started to go wrong.

First, she thought she heard footsteps. She hurried to a large tree with a low branch. She swung her bag up and then climbed. Hugged the branch, holding very still ... waiting ...

No one came. The relief was intense. The ancient gods of the forest are with me , she thought, giddy.

As she climbed down, rain started to fall. Within minutes, it was coming down fiercely. The sky lit with lightning.

What's a little rain ? She kept moving, as fast as seemed wise given that the ground was rapidly turning to mud. She started to feel a sort of rhythm with it, a confidence that she could do this, when she tripped on a tree root.

She fell hard, the impact knocking the wind from her. She struggled on the ground for a long moment, gasping to catch her breath through a mouth full of cold rain. Thankfully, she hadn't injured herself—though her cloak and skirts were now heavy with mud as well as water. Finally, she managed to get up and keep walking.

It took her a few minutes to realize she'd lost sight of the edge of the forest.

She took a deep breath. Surely, she couldn't have wandered far. The thing to do was to keep calm. Despite the wind. The icy rain. Her chattering teeth. She would simply walk in the direction she'd come from. Retrace her steps for the five minutes it would take to get back on track.

Ten minutes later, Arabella was facing the fact that she was utterly lost. And so cold she could barely feel her hands and feet.

Nothing to do but keep walking. Keep her head and keep walking.

How long did she walk? Hours. Days. Years. The rain briefly lessened, and for an eerie moment, the whole forest sparkled. Every raindrop illuminated by the unveiled moon. She felt she'd stepped into a story book. Any moment, a fairy would appear to offer her an unwise deal in exchange for safe passage. Or a wicked huntsman would gallop in, axe in hand, to chop out her heart to feed to an evil queen.

"I hope you don't mind your maiden hearts frozen stiff, Your Majesty," Arabella muttered aloud, numb lips slurring the words.

She laughed. Absurd. All of it was absurd. Keep walking.

The rain returned, angry now, pouring freezing hell on her soaked, shivering shoulders.

Keep going. Find the tree line. This is your last chance.

But she could barely feel her feet. She braced for a moment against the trunk of the tree, trying to stamp feeling back into her legs.

Her bag now weighed six hundred pounds. She could leave it, that was fine—she'd buy clothes in Paris. She crouched to pull her money purse from the bottom of the bag. She tried not to think about how violently her hands shook as she hung the strap around her neck and tucked the leather pouch into her bodice.

The world tilted as she straightened.

No. No time to be dizzy. Tree line. Road. Inn. London. Freedom.

"Tree line. Road. Inn." She walked. The pouring rain made the ground treacherous.

“Tree line. Road. Inn.” And robbed her of visibility beyond the next tree. You are truly bloody lost, Arabella.

“Tree line. Road.” If she stopped walking, the huntsman would find her, and slice her in half with his axe. She could hear the hoofbeats now, in the distance.

“Tree ...” What had she been saying? Never mind. Keep walking. Faster. The huntsman was getting closer.

“Arabella!” The huntsman knew her name, evidently. He was yelling into the wind. He sounded angry. “Arabella Denton !”

Nonsense. She was imagining things. The rain had gotten into her skull. There was no one in the forest but her. She just needed to find the ... find ...

And then it was before her: a great, black horse, water slicking off its massive flanks. And on it, the rain-blurry, looming figure of the huntsman, all in black, huge, faceless.

She stumbled back. Her legs gave out. If she hit the ground, she did not feel it. Maybe she was still falling?

A hundred miles away, the huntsman’s voice. “Dear God. You stupid child. Can you hear me?” And then, very close, his face—one burning eye, lips pulled tight. “Stay with me.”

“I hope the evil queen chokes upon my heart,” she said, and floated into blackness.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

The duke was breaking his rules, and he did not like it.

Going after Arabella Denton at all—that broke a rule. Nick should have sent a servant. Hell, all the servants.

Why had he gone? To keep it quiet, of course. To find her before word spread that his betrothed had fled in horror of his face.

Regardless. He'd sworn he'd never chase a woman.

And bringing her here. To his sanctuary. A cottage no one was to know existed.

But what was the alternative? Allow her to die of the cold?

Nick knew one thing: he was furious.

She was barely conscious when he carried her into the cottage. He stripped off her cloak to find her clothes soaked through. He'd see to that in a moment—first, a fire, before the cold rendered his hands as useless as hers.

Damn this idiotic girl. Damn her hysterics.

He lit an oil lamp near the fireplace. Thankfully, he'd been here just four days before, to read and write in solitude, and had left a pile of good dry wood. He had a fire going within minutes, and the space began to slowly fill with warmth.

Now, he lit an oil lamp, found towels, then went to the chest of drawers and retrieved

a linen shirt.

She was shivering alarmingly on the bed. “Miss Denton.” Her eyes did not open. She gave a soft, distant moan when he touched her shoulder. Ice. “Arabella,” he said, curtly. “We need to get you dry now.”

She mumbled something he couldn’t make out—something about trees? “I must remove your clothing,” he warned her.

He got to it, as efficiently as possible: unlaced and eased off her muddy boots, then her dripping stockings. Yanked the waterlogged gloves from her white fingers.

Then he got to work on unbuttoning her dress, cursing the tiny buttons under his breath. Finally, he peeled the wet garment away from her shaking body. He found a small bag hanging from her neck—enough money to leave the country, he noted—and set it aside. He felt his anger rise, push past his chest, up into his head.

Later. Once you’ve gotten her dry. No sense being enraged at her idiocy while she dies on the bed.

Her stays were even more stubborn—the wet had fused the ties into knots. Cursing, he pulled a small knife from his boot and cut through the lacings.

And then he saw that her eyes were fluttering open. She weakly tried to blink away her torpor. She saw his hand holding the knife, and whimpered.

“Bloody hell. You’ll catch your death. That’s all,” he said. “If you don’t like my undressing you, do it yourself.”

She tried, he’d give her that. She sat up, shivering hard. Her cut stays fell away, leaving only her chemise. Wet, stuck to her skin. He could clearly see the shape of

her body. He looked away.

She gripped the material in shaking hands. But she seemed at a loss to lift her arms.

“Just let me help you,” he snapped. “I don’t know what’s in your silly head, but I assure you, I have no plan to ravish anyone this evening.” Before she could protest, he grasped the fabric and pulled it over her head.

She was luminously pale, her skin everywhere smooth, slender limbs, small high breasts.

He tore his gaze away as soon as he realized he was staring. “Hell and the devil,” he growled at himself and turned abruptly.

What was he, a schoolboy? This was the woman who meant to humiliate him. He forced himself to keep moving fast, to grab the towel, vigorously dry her with his eyes mostly on the wall, pull her arms through the sleeves of his shirt and button it as quickly as his fingers would allow, then wrap her in a blanket.

But he’d seen. He knew now: she was a gorgeous creature, head to toe.

Not a surprise, that. She’d been lovely when he’d seen her under that tree, a quiet, large-eyed girl absorbed in sketching. She’d been lovely in her modest blue day dress the morning he proposed; he’d been almost painfully aware that every part of her would be soft.

He’d proposed despite that. The last thing he wanted was an overly compelling wife.

And so he’d been concerned, in fact, earlier this evening at dinner, when the reality that he wanted to lean closer to her kept interfering with his plan to ignore her.



That's not what she's for, he reminded himself.

And yet he'd still fought the urge to turn to her, to stare. He refused. She'd play her part, he'd play his, and the less they interacted, the better. Of course she was afraid of him. He'd yet to find a woman of good breeding who wasn't comically wide-eyed with terror at the sight of him. The eye. The scar. The allegedly murdered wife.

Nick's plan was simple. Had been simple. Find a suitable wife with whom he had nothing in common. Someone healthy, ready to bear him an heir. Someone quiet, polite, and preferably incurious by nature.

The fact that, due to her blackguard of a father, Arabella Denton was also very good for business was a not-inconsequential factor in choosing her above the score of near-identical candidates. But in the main, he sought someone who didn't cause trouble. Someone who didn't occupy his mind. Affect his mood, his choices. Capture, God forbid, his imagination.

He would do his duty, then ship her off with the children to his country estate, to ... embroider, or whatever it was ladies did. While he did what he did—travel, generally drown himself in work. If he needed passion, a woman in awe, her fear bending deliciously to arousal, he'd get it the usual way, by paying for it.

That Arabella was tempting—that her skin was creamy, her lashes long on lowered lids when she pilfered a glance—was mildly dangerous. He'd known he would need to tread carefully. The dose, as they say, makes the poison. His body responded readily to hers, a warning that it wouldn't take much to intoxicate, and potentially addict him.

He would never put himself in a situation where that might happen.

Because he was decided: he would form no attachment to any woman. And especially

not to his wife. He would bed her in the dark and leave. He'd do his best not to even touch those sweet little breasts.

And then she'd run. From their bloody betrothal dinner.

The feeling in his chest, the moment he realized she'd been gone too long—he knew . He'd miscalculated, gravely. She was not going to make this nearly simple enough.

Now, curled into herself on the bed, Arabella was still shivering hard, paler than ever. He hadn't seen someone so dangerously affected by cold since the day they'd pulled a half-frozen servant boy out of a winter lake, and that child had nearly died. He needed to get her warm, now.

He scooped her up in his arms; she didn't protest. She'd spent her strength. Her limp limbs were shockingly cold to the touch.

He brought her to the fire, laid her on the plush woolen rug where he kept a pile of cushions and books. She did not open her eyes, but she turned her body slightly toward the warmth.

He rose and efficiently stripped, dried off, fetched a shirt and breeches for himself, and came to join her. Her tremors seemed smaller, more internal now.

She didn't protest when he pulled her into him, her back against his chest, and covered them both in another blanket. She really was chilled to the bone.

He held her as her body shivered. Giving her his warmth. He took one slender white hand in his own, steadily rubbing warmth into each stiff finger, then the palm, then up her wrist. Then repeated the procedure with the second.

He didn't notice exactly when it happened, when she relaxed. He only knew that her

body against him had stopped being a hard, angular thing and began to melt into his, her muscles unwinding, breath deepening. Limbs becoming soft.

He felt a relief so sharp it took his breath away. For the first time, he realized how afraid he'd been, from the moment he'd found her, staggering in the storm, half-frozen, eyes vacant.

He felt an ironic laugh bubble in his chest. Wasn't this exactly what he'd been trying to avoid? Worrying about a woman? Fearing for her?

But alas. Despite the fearsome visage, he was only human. And he did feel for Arabella Denton; she was simply a young woman, about to enter into a marriage with a man about whom she knew only gleefully dark rumor. She'd spooked like a fawn approached by a wolf. She'd run—for her life, she must have imagined.

"You poor, foolish thing," he whispered into her hair. She smelled of rain, and very faintly of jasmine.

She didn't answer. By her breathing, she was asleep.

She snuggled closer with a dreamy sigh, the curves of her rubbing into him. He felt his body respond. Truly, he only wanted to warm her. He had no intention of feeling her .

He didn't know how long he could endure this.

He touched her arm, testing the temperature. Her skin was warm now, pinkening. Good.

She shifted in his arms, rolling onto her back, and the movement caused his hand to fall onto her linen-covered breast.

He moved the hand quickly. But not quickly enough to miss the weight, the tautness.

Enough.

He was trying to keep her alive, that's all. She was safe now. The last thing he wanted to do was put his hand anywhere on a woman who hadn't expressly invited it.

He eased his arm out from beneath her. And rolled away. She made a protesting sound, but did not move.

Relief, and the cooler air of the room, hit him as he rose to his feet. He walked away.

Nick opened her bag, which he'd found on the ground not far from where she staggered in the storm, and assessed its contents, hoping he'd find something a bit more appropriate for her to wear than a man's shirt.

She'd packed a woolen dress and a nightgown, but everything was damp. At the bottom of the bag, he found a few items, wrapped in a shawl that had, for the most part, kept them dry.

A small book. Shakespeare's Sonnets. Inside, pressed dried flowers. A handful of paintbrushes, tied together with a frayed ribbon, and a muslin sack holding drawing pencils and watercolor paints.

And, wrapped with care, two sketchbooks.

He looked to Arabella. She was asleep by the fire, body uncurled and relaxed now.

He flipped open the first book. Landscapes. Ducks and a lapdog. The sky on a clear day. Everything one might expect a lady to draw. She had a good eye for shade and texture, and rendered her subjects with care and a certain wit. It hadn't occurred to

him that she'd have real talent. But evidently, she did.

The second sketchbook didn't surprise him at first. Copies of statues and paintings from museum visits. Studies of a finely sculpted Greek thigh, the veins running over a marble forearm.

But then, a few pages in, he realized he wasn't looking at sculpture studies anymore, but sketches drawn from life. A voluptuous nude model posed with a basket of grapes, her hair braided loosely over one shoulder. The tender divots at the base of her back, the dimples of her arse rendered precisely.

Another, of the same woman from the bust up. Her mouth flirtatious, a finger lazily playing over a tendril of hair.

How had this well-behaved young lady found herself in a life-modeling class? Art schools and the like were generally off limits for women of quality. The nudity, of course, but also the counter-cultural, unapologetically debauched atmosphere.

He couldn't imagine her father knew. Did anyone?

A secret. Arabella was not exactly the woman he'd imagined. And he found, with no small measure of surprise, that he enjoyed discovering her other life.

But then he turned the page. And what he saw there changed his entire opinion of her.

I've been a fool.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

Warmth.

Perfect, delicious warmth.

Arabella woke slowly. She felt like she'd curled up in a very pleasant corner of a garden, late on a sunny afternoon.

As she opened her eyes, she realized she was lying on a plush rug before a crackling fire. Wrapped in the softest, most heavenly blankets.

She was warm, blissfully warm.

Where was she? As she sat up, the blanket fell away, revealing her bare legs. She stared at them, puzzled. Why was she wearing only a shirt—a man's shirt?

A creeping numbness that she recognized as a form of panic washed over Arabella as she attempted to recall what had happened. She'd gotten lost in a storm, and then she fell, and then ... hands, a knife, an impatient voice . . . I have no plan to ravish anyone this evening . . . .

“You were chilled to the marrow. The only dry clothes available were mine. The job was done as quickly as could be managed.”

She knew that level, deliberate voice. Her heart caught in her throat.

She turned, noting that she found herself in a cozy, well-appointed one-room cabin, with a bed in one corner, overflowing bookshelf, and a writing desk near a settee and

well-worn chairs.

In one of the chairs sat the Beast of Blackflint.

He held an open book in his lap, a glass of port balanced on one knee. Wearing a shirt like the one she wore, half-buttoned, sleeves rolled up. Light breeches. His feet were bare.

For a long, suspended moment, she simply looked at him. Registering his calm expression. Relaxed posture. His watchfulness.

Registering that she'd been found by the man she'd been trying to escape.

A man rumored capable of virtually anything.

"I assure you," he said, quieter, reading her expression. "Lingering over a shivering, barely-conscious woman is not to my taste. You have not been misused in any way." Now, something crossed over his face, fleetingly. "Save the dangers to which you subjected yourself. I am not optimistic that you'd have lasted the night if I hadn't found you when I did."

The buzz of anxiety had receded enough that Arabella was able to take stock of herself. There were no marks upon her. No part of her felt handled or disturbed. In fact, her body remained languid, pleased by the warmth of the fire. He must have gotten a look at her unclothed body, at least a bit at a time, during the proceedings, and that thought was exceedingly mortifying. But his tone made it clear that it he'd been profoundly unhappy to find himself in so unseemly a position with her.

It seemed the man was telling the truth. That she had been safe.

Up until now, at any rate.

The duke seemed in no rush to say anything further. Arabella found that sitting here, regarding the man as he regarded her, she was, for the first time, able to see what the man actually looked like. That eyepatch, that scar had drawn all her fascination—and she'd only really seen him from afar in her younger days. Now she could appreciate the stark cheekbones, the elegant eyebrows in their permanent angle of mild disdain, the hint of a divot in the center of his chin. He was actually quite handsome, she realized with a shock.

She realized he was waiting for her to speak.

What the devil did one say to one's savior, who also happened to be the man from whom one had been fleeing?

"Good evening, Your Grace," she managed, and the words sounded at once surreal and very stupid.

"Are you well?" he asked, neutrally.

She nodded. "I think so. And I thank you," she added quickly.

He raised an eyebrow. "For what? I destroyed your plans."

She did not know what to say. He was so quiet, so still. But she could discern something roiling underneath. He must be furious. Of course he was furious.

"I let our guests know that the excitement of the evening had caused your head to ache, and conveyed your regrets for withdrawing before dessert was served. They send their ardent wishes for your speedy recovery."

"Thank you," she said again, though it was ridiculous to say it.



“Your father was aware that you’d . . . wandered off. He was, of course, deeply distressed over it, as well as eager to maintain discretion. I reassured him that locating you, sheltering you during the storm, and returning you safely would be a simple enough task. As I told him, I know every inch of these lands, by day and by dark. So there was never a real chance of you slipping through.”

Never a real chance. She felt a sharp pang of regret. Her escape attempt had been so futile all along.

She realized that he was waiting for her to respond. Repeating the words thank you seemed farcical. “I ... I don’t know what to say.”

“You were running away.”

What could she do but nod? There was no other plausible excuse, at least not one she could conjure in this moment, for disappearing into the night with a bag of clothing and every shilling she had.

“Running from me.”

Should she apologize? Would that only make it worse?

When she did not reply, he rose. And briskly crossed the room to her.

He stood over her. Bare feet very near her own. He loomed, staring down at her with a detachment that felt dangerous.

And then, abruptly, he knelt beside her. And looked her in the eye. “Miss Denton.” His voice was sharp now. She swallowed. Nodded. “Did you run because you fear me?”

She mutely shook her head.

He tilted his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“I am afraid of you,” she admitted. “Everyone is afraid of you. But that is not why I ran.”

He leaned back on his heels. “Your lover, then?” He anticipated her startled response with a shrug. “Who is it, by the way? Is it the man fisting his own cock, or the one with his head buried between some other chit’s legs?”

Arabella heard herself gasp—in shock of the words, and horror of what they meant. What he must have found.

“Playing the innocent would waste your time.” He nodded to the floor near his seat, and there she saw the evidence she knew she would see. Her sketchbook.

Oh God, she thought. I doomed myself the day I decided not to burn that book.

He took her chin in his hand, between thumb and forefinger, not gently. He turned her head to his, and held it there. Now, she could do nothing but meet his deep green gaze, let it penetrate straight to the core of her.

What is under that eyepatch? S he wondered in a rush of hysterical emotion that somehow made her want to laugh. She suppressed it, exhaled sharply to get a hold of herself.

“I do not appreciate being lied to,” he said softly.

“I haven’t—”

“You presented yourself as a suitable bride. Well-mannered. A virgin. You had me believe you were shy.” He shook his head . “Do you know what I was thinking, sitting next to you at dinner, watching your pale little hand fuss with your fork, your big, worried eyes steal looks at me?”

She shook her head, tried to pull away from his hand.

He did not let go. “I was thinking, ‘I will need to be so gentle with this skittish little slip.’ I was imagining our wedding night, how careful I would have to be, not to frighten you, or hurt you.”

“Your Grace, I am a—”

“Oh, I know what you are, and how you like to be treated.”

And before she could reply, protest, anything, he moved toward her. To kiss her, she realized.

She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks, pounding in her ears. Her heart was a panicked sparrow.

But he stopped. His mouth not three inches from hers.

He held there. His breathing was angry. The fingers holding her chin were angry. The kiss he’d been an instant from delivering was obviously meant to be cruel.

“I have never,” he breathed, fury threaded through every deceptively soft syllable, “kissed a woman without very clear invitation. And I won’t be provoked to it now.” He moved a fraction closer. “But I trust. You receive. My meaning.”

She did. She wanted to shove him away. She wanted to slap him across the face.

But somehow, all her attention, all the jangled energy of her body, felt compelled to his mouth. Against her better judgment, her choice, her will , she could attend to nothing but the exquisite awareness that their mouths were so close she could feel the heat of his lips. Feel every subtle movement of his breath.

All the fine hairs rose on the back of her neck, on her arms. The surge she'd felt—she'd have called it fear—seemed to be spreading through her body. And pooling in all her limbs.

The duke was feeling something too, she could see. His brow furrowed. His mouth dipped yet closer—and then he pulled back an inch, scowling, as though he could not quite understand what was happening.

He let go of her chin. But did not move away. He was waiting for her to do so.

She didn't. Couldn't. Felt as held into place as she had when his hand was on her.

His eye was darting over her features, now. Trying to figure out why she hadn't moved.

His lips hovered, breath held. He was giving her one last chance.

She did not take it.

And then he pressed his mouth to hers.

She heard her breath catch as his mouth parted over hers, his tongue sliding over the seam, insisting, opening her lips, slipping inside. Shock pulsed through her. This invasion, entirely new. His tongue . Moving into her like she was a thing he owned.

He loathes you. He means to punish you. Push him away. She put her hands on his

shoulders, gripped the hard muscle.

But when his tongue glided over hers—softer than she expected—a shiver ran over her, stopping her hands.

All at once, she wanted to lean in. Match his brutality with her own. Her pulse pounded with the need of it, like this kiss was air, food. She'd almost died in the cold tonight, and this was the very opposite, was life, was heat. To her dismay, even the fury of it felt energizing, medicinal.

He's not wrong about me. I am wanton at heart, regardless of my maidenhood.

She hated herself for it. For wanting to run her hands along his arms, to discover more. He had caught her. He would force her to marry and throw her in a bucolic prison for the rest of her life. What in blazes is wrong with you, Arabella?

When Nick kissed Arabella, he was surprised to feel the fury abruptly draining from him. Replaced by a tide of pure, aching want .

Her touch on his shoulders, beginning to move, to feel him, stirred electricity in his blood.

The tip of her tongue tentatively met his, and he groaned. He felt the blood rush into his cock.

And now the kiss was not an accusation. Was not rage or betrayal.

It was need. It was two mouths discovering that they speak the same language. Two bodies awakening and clamoring to merge.

His hand moved into her hair, unbound and curly and warm from the fire. He only

knew he needed to feel more of her. His other hand found her waist in his linen shirt, slid up to the high curve of her small breast, cupping it in his hand, his thumb finding her nipple, brushing over it, once, twice, feeling it harden and respond. She made a sound of surprise that gave way to something breathless.

Through the fabric, he pinched her nipple between thumb and forefinger—and she hissed, and leaned into him. As if her hands had been emboldened by his, she felt along his arms, across his chest, discovering him, curious, a little tentative.

It was the tentativeness—and the sound she'd made when he'd slid his tongue into her mouth, and the one she made when he took her breast in his hand. Her body stiffening ... and then, slowly, melting. Shock and wonder at once.

He could not shake the uneasy feeling that this was new to her.

He broke the kiss abruptly.

She sat back, stunned.

He watched her try to recover composure. Watched her lift her fingers unconsciously to her now-swollen lips, touching them with dazed curiosity.

In that moment, she looked very much like the innocent he'd imagined her to be.

Even more so when she met his gaze, her eyes wide, glistening.

And so he wasn't entirely able to dismiss it when she said in an unsteady voice, "As I was trying to say, Your Grace. I am a virgin." Her eyes drifted to the sketchbook on the floor. "Perhaps you will allow me to explain."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

After Arabella recounted the story of her voyeuristic night, the duke got up without a word. She watched him expectantly.

He poured them each a glass of port, and then set about feeding another log into the fire.

She could not tell if he was angry. She could not tell what he was. “Do you ... believe me, Your Grace?”

Instead of answering, he asked, “Is it why you ran?”

She flushed, looked down at her hands. “The truth is ... what I saw in the back room had nothing to do with it.” She struggled for the right words. “It is difficult to describe how ... exhilarated I felt, to be in a studio, working alongside artists.”

She flicked him a look, expecting to see dubiousness, impatience. But he seemed to be listening. So she continued. “I mean to say serious ones. Artists are everywhere, painting miniatures and dog portraits for the rich. But these were devoted. In that studio, they serve the gods of beauty and honesty. No flattery—they paint with a hard, intimate eye. They reveal themselves in their work. Some of it so brutal or sensual, a lady is never meant to see such images in her lifetime. Among them ... I felt so much myself. In a way that I cannot say I ever do at balls and dinners and the opera. That version of me feels very much a mask.”

“You don’t wish to marry. Have a family.”

“It’s not that. I have always wanted children. But I cannot abide the thought of it, at

the expense of all the rest of me.”

“And so . . . Paris,” he said, with what might have been disdain.

“Yes, Paris.” She would not apologize.

“Is there someone there for you?”

“I told you, I have no lover. I’ve never had a lover.”

“So then, you run toward ... some general notion of life among the eccentrics and madmen?”

“Monsieur Allard and I have spoken a few times,” she said. “He has, from the start, claimed to see something in my work.” She caught the disdainful angle of the duke’s eyebrow and snapped, “He has never made an advance. He may be thoroughly French, but he is an artist first, and a teacher, and he has treated me with more respect than I ever dreamed a female painter could receive.” She exhaled, hearing the quaver in her own voice. Then, more measured, continued. “He has a studio in Paris. As with the one in London, classes are open to women.”

“What kind of women?” He asked, cuttingly.

“Well. Not like me, obviously,” she said, matching his tone. “Models, shopgirls. Whores.” No sense telling truth by half-measure. They’d been talented, the women she met that night. Their drawings were good. She found she had no judgment at all about what they did with the remainder of their time. People did all sorts of things to survive. “A few women have made names for themselves as artists in Paris. The French are more modern than we are. It’s not easy, certainly, but it is not impossible.”

“But in the meantime, you would—what, acquire a profession?”



“If you looked through my bag you know I have a letter. I thought I might become a governess.”

“A governess,” he repeated. As though she said she might become a cocker spaniel.

She’d had enough of his superior, dubious tone. “I assure you, I know exactly what I am about, Your Grace,” she said, anger flaring. “It is no small thing, to give up one’s place in the world, one’s home and family and all the comforts, for something far more difficult and unknown. But that is exactly what I wish to do.”

He said nothing for a long moment.

“You would leave society forever,” he finally said.

“Yes.”

And she had the sense that for the first time, he truly saw her.

His voice was softer when he spoke again. “Innocent young women who run away to foreign lands don’t always end up governesses,” he said.

“I know. I can take care of myself. I can find respectable work. And no work I can imagine, respectable or otherwise, would be as distressing to me as the thought of never becoming what I could be.”

He tilted his head. “Do you really think,” he asked, lethally quiet, “that I would not have let you paint?”

“Kittens. Grassy hills. A lake. Fruit,” she shot back. “I want to paint real life—and I want to do it with the intensity and veracity allowed my male contemporaries. Not to mention, I want to paint subject matter women are not meant to know exists until

their wedding night. And that, a lady cannot ever do. The shame would destroy her entire family.” She took a shaky breath. “So there you have it. I am contented to abandon my place because in truth, I am no lady. I am something that does not fit, something scandalous, wrong, perhaps mad. The logistics of making a new life may be daunting, but leaving behind the one to which I was born was easy.”

She fought tears. Why had she bothered to share any of it? Blackflint had caught her. It was done. Her chance was gone. He would take her back to her father, who would lock her in her room till the wedding, with nothing to do but hear him through the walls, raging at the staff and throwing glasses. She and the duke would be married exactly as planned. He did not care about her, so why would he care what she wanted? He’d put an heir in her belly, then ship her off to charming nowhere. He’d live in the city, do exactly as he pleased every second of the day, sleep with beautiful courtesans every night, forget Arabella even existed.

The duke sat beside her. He looked particularly fearsome this close, the white scar on his cheek raised and angry.

“Miss Denton.”

“Yes.” Her voice was small.

“Consider our engagement broken,” he said. “You are free to go.”

She couldn’t have heard him right.

But . . . he had said it.

“I do not relish the thought of you alone in Paris, surrounded by artists.” The duke said artists the same way he might cutpurses. “ But I cannot abandon my conviction that your life is your own.”

She was beyond surprised. She was stunned.

One corner of his mouth quirked up, seeing her struggle to absorb what he'd just given her. "I mean what I say, I assure you." Then, more serious, he added, "I may be cold. But I would not see a woman's spirit crushed."

She realized she was still on the verge of tears. Drew a breath to compose herself. "I am truly sorry, Your Grace, for the trouble I have caused you."

He sighed. "I believe you have saved me from far greater trouble." He leaned back on his arms, crossed his legs in front of him. The firelight flickered over the exposed skin at his open collar. How had she missed how beautiful he was before? Was it possible that a scar and a patch of black silk would distract her from all that muscular grace, the power that seemed to emanate from his body when he sat perfectly still?

"I will tell you, Miss Denton. Now that I know what I know of you ... I am glad that we will not be wed." He didn't sound like he was trying to insult her. He sounded ... contemplative. "We will discuss arrangements in the morning, once the rain lets up." It was still pounding the roof and showed no sign of abating. "And then you will go."

"I don't know what to say but thank you. For allowing me to—"

"I am going to do more than allow it. I am going to help you."

He reached a hand out to her then, but seemed to catch himself. He let his hand drop. "I have connections in Paris who will help you with employment. I will give you any additional monies you might need. And I will wish you good fortune in your new life."

She took that in, overwhelmed.

“You are staring,” he finally said.

You are not what people believe you are, she thought. “You did not kill your wife,” were the words that fell from her mouth.

He coughed in surprise. She felt her cheeks flame. “Forgive me—it’s the port, and the—the night, I did not mean to—”

“Let me know you’ve been convinced I am a murderer?” She could not tell if he was angry. “What was in your mind, I wonder at the moment you accepted my proposal, knowing the last one had been—throttled? Stabbed through the heart? Is there an agreed-upon wife-dispatching method or is each rumor bespoke?”

Arabella struggled for words that wouldn’t make it all worse. He let the awkward silence spin out for a moment, before finally allowing himself an amused smile. “Don’t fret, Miss Denton, I’m not offended in the least,” he said. “Would you like to hear the truth?”

She nodded.

“I’ve encouraged the rumors, in my way. Helpful to be feared, in many situations. And it very effectively stopped people from speaking insipidly of my late wife. Murderers are rarely forced to endure condolences.” He gave a shake of his head. “But no, I did not. Nor did I kill a man in a duel. Though I suppose I could if the situation demanded it.” He threw her a dry look. “You believed it all, did you? That easily fooled by a scarred face?”

She wanted to protest, but she found herself at a loss. “I am an idiot, I suppose,” she said.

“Yes.”

He just looked at her then, for a long moment.

“You should go to bed,” he finally said, brusque now. “I’ll sleep here by the fire. Come daylight, we will finalize arrangements. Good night.”

“Good night, Your Grace.”

But she did not want to move from this spot. Not yet.

He was staring into the fire now, in his own thoughts. She realized she was looking at his shoulders. Remembering them under her hands. She suddenly had the vivid impulse to touch them again. To slip her hand inside his shirt, feel the texture of his skin.

She could. He was right there. She could reach out a hand. She could ...

She could tell him the rest of it. The parts she’d barely told herself.

“Your Grace?”

“Nicholas, I suppose. Considering what’s transpired, the formality feels a bit ironic,” he said absently without looking up. “Nick.”

“Nick, then.” She liked the way it felt in her mouth. His name. “I will make one last confession. If you would hear it.”

He flicked his eye to her, curious. Then away, to the fire. He nodded.

“After that night in the studio ... there was more than one reason I knew I was not suited to be a gentleman’s wife. That any man who married me would be horrified.”

He smiled a strange little smile—it almost looked like regret—and met her gaze. “That is hard for me to believe.”

“Well, you have not been in a position to—to see me as I truly am.”

“I had you naked on that bed two hours ago, when we arrived,” he said. “You were insensible with cold, and I was far more concerned with the possibility of your death than the shape of your breasts. And yet, your body etched itself into my mind in considerable detail. I sincerely doubt I will ever forget how you truly are .” She felt herself flush with astonishment. “I assure you, Miss Denton. No man who sees you could find you horrifying.”

She was too taken aback to speak.

He turned back to the fire, pensive now. “Go to bed.”

It was tempting to do as he said. To lose her nerve.

But she found she wanted to tell him the truth, very badly.

“That night, in the back room, surrounded by ... all the things I drew, and so much more ...” She took a deep breath. “I was honest with you when I said I am entirely inexperienced in it. But ... ”

She could see he was listening very intently. “But?” He echoed softly.

“I wanted to. Join in. Be—taken. And take. Something ... awoke in me. Something so voracious, it shocked me.”

He was holding his body carefully still. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because if we had wed, I would be hiding it from you. Afraid I’d disgust you.”

He said nothing. Her heart was beating rabbit-fast in her throat. Good God, Arabella. Just say it. “But as it turns out, I will never be your wife. Our connection will be over in a matter of hours.” A hint of humor crept into her voice. “I suddenly comprehend why men are so inclined toward taking a professional to bed. Part of the appeal must be that when it is done, they promptly depart.” She shrugged, deadpan. “I suppose I am saying ... you are in just such a position, tonight. With me.”

He threw her a sharp look. “You are no whore, Miss Denton.”

“Arabella,” she corrected. And she placed her hand on his leg.

He looked down at it. Then at her.

“Have a care, Arabella,” he said quietly.

“I will do that, Nick.” She began to slide her hand up his thigh. “But not tonight.” She moved her hand over his breeches, to the bulge of his cock. She felt it stir under her hand, and she squeezed it lightly through the material.

He put his hand over hers, to stop her. But, she noticed, he did not move her hand away.

“Tonight is—well, the last night I shall be Arabella. It is my chance, you see. To know these things. If you would show me.”

He stared at her, shocked. And then, with evident effort, said, “I ... am flattered. And well aware I haven’t always been one tonight, but—I am a gentleman. I cannot—”

“I know. I know you would never do any of it with your fine lady wife.” She laughed

unsteadily. “But ... I want those things. I want to know. What ... what it all feels like.” She noted that his breathing, though quiet, had grown uneven. “Just once. Just tonight.”

She leaned close. “After all, we will never see each other again.” And she kissed him.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

Nick tried to hold still. To resist the kiss.

Arabella's request was tempting, of course. Almost touching in its na?veté.

It reminded him of his late wife. Beatrice.

He had been so in love with her, from the moment they met at a ball, each of them twenty years old. She had, in their rare private moments, walking ahead of her chaperone in a garden, or alone in a carriage before her mother joined them, desired him openly, slyly letting him know how much she looked forward to their wedding night.

And when that night came, he had barely stopped himself in time, very nearly destroying their relationship.

The whores and actresses he'd lain with in his youth had matched his passion with bawdy good nature. And they'd been happy to indulge any proclivity that rose to mind. Treating them firmly. Fucking them with complete, filthy abandon. Tying them up, reddening their buttocks with a paddle or simply driving them mad with slow, relentless sensual torture. Inviting them to take the discipline to him.

There was the spiky physical bliss of it, of course. But there was also relief, after a lifetime of displaying impeccable manners in room after room of buttoned-up ladies and boring, small-minded lords. People who never said what they meant or admitted to what they truly wanted. Nick craved direct, frank connection. He knew honesty was too much to ask in life, but the bed was a simpler, bolder place. A place to do exactly what most lit one's imagination and lifted one's cock.

None of that was fit for a lady, as he'd realized the very first time he pinned the wrists of his new bride to the bed as he kissed her with passion.

She'd pulled away abruptly. And then she'd burst into tears and run out of the room.

He'd pled ignorance, over-enthusiasm—he hadn't meant anything by it. It wasn't what he wanted. He only wanted to love her.

That was true, actually. He was utterly besotted. She was lovely, and funny, and intelligent. She cared for friends and family and animals she took in. She kissed like she laughed—sweetly, lightly. And she loved him. She confessed that she'd been in love with him since they first met. That he was the only man she'd ever wanted.

After his single misstep, he was perfectly gentle with her, always. His touch only soothed and coaxed, never demanded.

He only grew to love her more as time went by. Their friendship was unmatched. He could not imagine being unfaithful—but he knew in the back of his mind that he'd locked a piece of himself away. That it stirred in him, restless. Perhaps he would have had to address it one way or another, had their marriage, with its companionship and intimacies and its dreadfully predictable intercourse, gone on long enough.

But then, abruptly, she was gone.

He would have given anything to have her back. He'd have given sexual gratification away forever, without a thought.

Instead, he was alone. And he was free to explore his basest fancies. With bored baronesses eager to cheat. With courtesans and widows and opera dancers.

As for his heart, it was dust in his chest. He could not make it whole again. And why

would he? It would only invite another shattering. It took years to recover enough to simply face his duty, to embrace the fact that he would need to marry again. Find someone suitable to bear his heirs.

But now he knew two things.

First, that a fine lady must never be confronted with his true desires. He would relegate those to an hour or two with a whore now and again. With his wife, he would be gentle in the extreme. He would not seek to slake his thirst there. He would not frighten her with his need.

Second, that he would not offer even the slightest bit of his heart. Obliterated once was more than sufficient. And because he knew a tender coupling had the tendency to stoke tender feelings, he would not linger over lovemaking with his wife, ever. He would dispatch his duty in the quickest and most perfunctory way possible.

It was just as well. Love was for the young. The naive. The enthusiastic and foolish. As he had been, back when he had both his eyes and fewer scars and all the wide world at his feet.

Arabella Denton had been an ideal choice, for a number of reasons. She seemed shy, circumspect, a lady who eschewed the social whirl in favor of sketching under trees. And everything he observed about her person made him certain his plans for her were correct. She was a small woman—standing, her head came to the top of his shoulder. Slender, fair, with delicate features and a way of walking that made her seem to float slightly above the ground. As gentle as he'd been with Beatrice, he knew he'd need to be more so with this woman.

But now, in this moment, in his cottage, rain beating on the roof, Arabella Denton was shredding to ribbons his assumptions about her fragile constitution.

In fact, she was undoing him entirely with her mouth as she kissed him fiercely, licking her tongue across his lips to mimic what he'd done to her earlier.

Every part of him wanted to kiss her back.

No . Arabella could not know what she was asking. If he met her ardor with the true force of his own, he would frighten her. He needed to put a stop to it.

Dear God, but she was delicious. Pressing her body to him, her hand over his straining breeches, her tongue searching, a little clumsy as she worked the kiss deeper. She nipped his bottom lip with her teeth, and the pleasure of that pain surged directly to his cock.

When she felt his response, she did it again.

Quick study, he thought. Oh, the things he wanted to show her in that moment. To teach her. The things he wanted to do to her.

He pulled away. "Arabella. You do not know what you ask."

"You saw the sketches," she said. "I think I do know."

"I am not the right man for it. For you."

"But ..." she leaned in again, this time finding his ear. "But I want you. Whatever you are." Her tongue flicked out, traced his earlobe, and he felt himself shudder.

Enough . He grabbed her by the arms and held her away from him, grip too tight. To his consternation, the rough treatment did nothing to quell her enthusiasm. In fact, something new and delighted lit her eyes.

“Don’t try to kiss me again,” he said.

She nodded acquiescence, and he let her go.

She did not try to kiss him.

Instead, she pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Leaving herself completely naked before him. And inviting him to look.

He should not look.

And he could not stop looking. He consumed her with his eyes. Slim limbs, rose nipples, skin pink and lightest gold in the firelight.

Pure, hot desire filled him. Every complex thought was silenced. There was only what he needed.

He needed to see every part of her. Now .

Hand her the shirt and tell her to put it back on.

But that seemed a sure way to stoke further defiance.

A different tack, then.

“Lean back,” he told her, his voice firm, cool. “And open your legs.”

Her eyes widened.

Good , he thought. Realize I frighten you. Let’s put an end to it before it starts.

Arabella leaned back on her arms. Her bare, pale legs crossed at the ankles. She looked at him, serious, expectant.

He did not repeat the request. The better part of him hoping she'd do it now—burst into tears, be done with this game.

She uncrossed her ankles and slid her feet apart.

She watched him, not breathing, as his gaze lowered to her sex.

It was petite, pink, with lush petals. The inner lips quivered under his gaze.

He wanted to pounce on her. Instead, he took a long, deep breath. Drinking in the sight.

“It looks sweet. Your little cunt.”

The words sent a shiver through her. Her tongue unconsciously darted out, touched her lower lip.

Again the thought crossed his mind: she does not know what she asks. He'd crossed so many lines already, but some part of him was enough still a gentleman to demand that he warn her, while he still had sense in his head to do it.

“A lady like you needs care,” he said. “Always, and more so when she is new to it. Look at you. Delicate. Small. You need a man who would love you gently,” his eye flicked back to her sex, which mesmerized him in much the way a topographical map might mesmerize a general planning his attack. “I would not be gentle. I would devour you.”

Now he met her gaze. “You witnessed fucking, in that studio. I would fuck you hard.

I would show you no mercy. I would make you submit to me.”

She swallowed.

“You look afraid,” he said. “Which speaks to your good sense.” He exhaled. Straightened. “Go to bed now, Arabella. While I let you.”

She did not move.

“Now,” he said, a warning.

“No,” she replied, her voice firmer now. “You mistake me. I am not afraid of you.” She let her legs fall open a little wider. “I want to be devoured.”

He should get up and walk away. Now. Or he would not be able to do so.

He managed to rise to his feet. He stood over her.

Tell her this madness is finished, he thought, harsh. Say it.

But even as Nick had the thought, he knew he’d already made a different choice.

“On your knees,” he said.

She blushed. But rose to her knees, luminously naked before him. He took her in, unsmiling. That soft skin brought the most depraved ideas to mind. It made him feel capable of anything.

“Do you mean to . . . humiliate me?” she asked.

Is that what his expression told her? Just as well. “Do you feel humiliated?”

She shook her head. “I feel curious.” She gave a husky laugh.

His cock twitched. This woman. Good Christ.

In that moment, he knew he could not be the better man for much longer. He could not fight himself all night. Not when losing that fight meant having her.

She held his gaze. Expectant. She wasn’t entirely truthful—he saw a hint of fear there, sparking friction against her arousal.

“I want you to take me into your mouth,” he said. He heard her breath hitch. God, he could spend right now, viciously, without even touching her. “But not yet,” he decided. If he was going to do this, he would not race. He would feast. “First ... lie down.”

She did so, lowering herself onto her back among the pillows. She gazed up at him. He stood there for a moment, taking her in from head to toe.

“Touch yourself,” he said.

She looked surprised. A shadow of embarrassment crossed her features. But it passed, and the desire stayed. She moved a hand to hover over her cunt, then cup it.

“Slide a finger between the lips,” he said, voice cracking.

She did as he said. Gliding along her seam, opening herself, dipping inside, her eyes never leaving the duke.

He needed to be closer. He got on his knees, between her legs. “Now show me,” he said.



She came up on her elbows, held her hand up to him. The middle finger was glistening. “Wet,” he said silkily. “You are wanton. Aren’t you?”

He took her hand, raised it to his mouth, and sucked the wet finger in. He moved his tongue over it. A moan escaped her. In response, he bit the finger. She gasped, and he let her finger go.

“The way you taste,” he murmured, “is dangerous.”

She simply lay back against the pillows, eyes glinting. Inviting him.

Some part of him still expected her to change her mind. To realize this was too much. Too demanding, too exposing. But in the meantime ...

“Do you know how to give yourself pleasure?” he asked.

Embarrassed, she nodded.

“Let me see it.”

He moved down between her legs, now, on his stomach, leaning on his elbows, his face very near her most private places. His view was perfect as she slid her hand over her sex, gathering a bit of silky moisture and dragging it up to her clitoris. A breathless oh escaped her.

“Don’t stop,” he said on a low growl.

She circled again with her glossy finger, and again, and the pleasure began to build in her.

He watched her fingers move. Watched the muscles of her stomach contract. Her

breath sped up, her lids grew heavy over her eyes.

“You liked to watch, at the art studio,” he said. “It seems you also like to be watched. Don’t you?”

She answered with a shred of a moan. Her finger moved faster.

Now, he moved his hand to touch her there. Christ , she was wet. He watched her face as, without warning, he slid a finger inside her.

She gasped, arched up. “Nick—”

She was so tight. The desire to climb onto her, to replace his finger with his cock, overwhelmed him, narrowed his vision, stole his breath.

Not yet.

He plunged a second finger into her. She stopped breathing, feeling the intensity, the tightness of it. Her moving finger skidded off course, paused.

“Too much?” He asked.

“Yes— no .” She was surrendering to the feeling now, pressing into his hand, inviting more.

She returned her finger to her clitoris, but he snatched it away with his other hand.

She made a frustrated noise. “Why—”

But he cut off her words when he put his tongue on her cunt and licked her, long, slow and full. She seemed to melt into him, her moan a rich, surprised, needy sound.

The taste of her . He felt a savageness boiling up. He ran his tongue over every part of her, teasing, sampling, as his fingers continued their slow, deep invasion. And then he pressed his mouth to her pearl and sucked greedily. She squealed.

So responsive. Abandoned to her own pleasure. Her head was thrown back now, eyes squeezed shut, entirely taken by the sensations he was causing inside her.

He lifted his mouth. Held his fingers still inside her. She made an impatient sound. “Tell me what you want,” he said.

She hissed. “Don’t stop .”

He fixed her with a coolly intent look. “Beg me.” Her eyes widened. “If you wish me to continue, I will need to hear you beg me for it.”

And here, she balks, he thought. Here, she wakes up to the madness of it, and tells me to stop.

“Please,” she said breathlessly. “ Please don’t stop.”

It went straight to his cock, those words. “Beg me to push you over the edge.” He said, voice dipping lower. “Beg me to make you come with my tongue.”

“ Please,” she said, voice breaking, as he slid his fingers out, then in. “I need you to—I beg you to—” he moved his fingers faster, knowing that it distracted her, made it hard for her to speak, to think. He flicked his tongue over her clitoris once, lightly. She groaned her exasperation. “Tormentor,” she said, half a cry, half a laugh.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Do you need release, pet? Do you need me to take you there?”

“ Yes. Please. Nick. I’ll—”

He licked her again, keeping her there, tightly wound, so close, yet never taking her all the way over the edge. “You’ll what? What would you do for me?”

“Whatever you—give you—my mouth, or ...” He kissed her clitoris, sucked it again for just long enough to make her arch, to moan brokenly, “Or ...”

“Say it, little wanton. Will you give me this pretty cunt?”

“Yes. Please .”

“To fuck as hard as I need to, until I spill in you, deep?” She shuddered as he blew over her.

She was so wet . His fingers were drenched with her. God. She wanted this. Wanted it like he wanted it.

That made him wild. Made him want to push her further. Show her more of what he could give her.

He pressed into her with the two fingers till his palm was seated against her; and now, let his ring finger brush ever so lightly behind, to a place she had never been touched, never imagined a man might touch.

She stiffened, unsure.

“Ask me to stop and I’ll stop,” he said, low, arousal and a hint of a tease threaded through his voice. “Pleasure is a vast continent. I only want to satisfy that voracious curiosity of yours.” He saw a glimmer of a smile at that, felt her body begin to give itself over to him. He curved the fingers inside her, eliciting a new, high, urgent moan. Her eyes fell shut, lost to the sensations running through her.

“Look at me, pet.” She opened her eyes, looked down to him, his mouth hovering over her, lips wet with her essence. “There are so many ways I can wring bliss from your body,” he said, and pressed inside, very gently, just an inch, with his ring finger. “No, don’t look away. Look at me.” She nodded once, kept her eyes locked on him. She was flushed, a desperate look in her eyes. “I want you to watch me. I’m going to make you come now.”

And he dipped his mouth to her, licked her voluptuously, and now, finally, he drew her into his mouth, rolling her clitoris over his tongue as he sucked, steadily, firmly, harder now, causing her whole body to tense, to quiver uncontrollably as she neared her peak.

“Oh God,” she breathed. “Oh please—please, Nick, please— please —”

And then her body went rigid, as unendurable pleasure exploded through her, shaking her, stealing her breath, and finally releasing her into honeyed limpness.

He licked her slow, full, gentle as she rode the waves, landing her very softly back on the earth.

And then he lay down on his back beside her, listening to her breathing as she came back to herself. His muscles felt tight, buzzing with energy. His cock was furiously hard. He could not recall the last time he’d been so aroused.

He shut his eye, considering the woman lying next to him. A woman he’d thought shy, boring, easy to overlook.

What an idiot you are.

He felt a hand skate over him. Two hands, unbuttoning his shirt, then finding the falls of his breeches and working the buttons free, one by one.

When he looked, she was kneeling over him. She smiled dreamily. And yanked his open breeches down his legs, springing his cock free.

“My turn,” she said, and reached for his cock.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

The Duke of Blackflint had Arabella on her back so quickly, she wasn't sure how it happened. He held himself over her, looked down at her.

"I believe it was already your turn," he said, amused.

"But now I want to—"

"Please me?" She nodded. He was holding his body away from hers, but the heaviness of his cock pulled it down to graze her mound. She squirmed, wanting to feel more. Who was she? She didn't recognize herself at all anymore, but the truth was ... she liked this. All of it. Being wanton. Being entirely in the duke's hands.

"How will you please me?" he asked.

"With—my mouth, I thought, as you did, and my hands—"

"And you know how to do this for a man?" He was teasing her, she could see.

"No, but I thought I could . . . experiment."

He smiled at her as one would a pupil who had given the wrong answer. And deliberate, hard, he ground himself against her. "I find I'm feeling a bit too urgent to be toyed with by a novice, pet," he said.

Her eyes lit with understanding. "Then ... tell me. What you want me to do." By the flash of heat in his expression, she knew she had read him right.

“Tell me,” she said, her voice honey now.

He looked pleased. He leaned down to her, kissing her slow and deep. She could taste a lingering trace of her arousal, fresh, tart, and marveled that only moments before, this man had used that shocking tongue to send her to the angels.

He slid up her body now, allowing his cock to drag over her stomach, and, straddling her, rose to his knees. He was barely touching her body, to her consternation. His cock lightly brushed between her breasts. He shrugged out of his open shirt, and she saw that he did indeed have scars on the lean expanse of his chest and stomach—not gruesome, as the stories had claimed, but certainly real battle wounds, slashes that had been stitched up. One over his left nipple, another across his belly below the navel.

What happened to you? She’d never ask it.

He reached down to her face, ran a finger over her mouth, then pushed inside. “You are so beautiful,” he said, and there was something in his tone that sounded like a warning. “Such pretty lips,” he murmured, and pushed another finger in. “Show me how you suck, pet.”

She did, sucking his fingers, her eyes locked to his face. A slow smile spread over his features. “Good girl. A little harder. Very good.”

He pulled his hand away, wet from her mouth, and wrapped it around his cock. She watched as he stroked himself, slow and hard. It was remarkable to watch, and the position he kept her in, under him as he knelt over her, made her feel nervous, trapped and thrilled at once, the feelings merging into something new and strange, something that filled her body with restless need.

“I could spill now,” he said. “I could have spilled a hundred times while I was tasting



you. You require an exceedingly high level of self-control.”

He moved up farther over her body, now. His knees against the sides of her breasts, his cock directly above her as he stroked it roughly.

“Open your mouth, sweetness,” he said.

She wanted to, and she was a little afraid—he was a large man, and she was thoroughly at his mercy, just as he had warned.

He must have read her hesitation, because he said, quieter, “Trust me, Bella. I would not hurt you.” That smirk reappeared briefly. “Except to give you pleasure. At your express request.”

She felt an odd shift, when he said it. Trust me . Something in her, beyond reason, heard it. He had pulled her out of the rain on the verge of collapse, brought her here, where he could have done anything to her. But she had been safe—she had been the one who asked for this, for everything happening now.

Something passed between them, then. Serious and frank. Vulnerable. It made Arabella’s heart swell in her chest in a way that almost hurt.

You won’t have this again.

There was this night. And then she would leave his world. And whomever she encountered in her new life, whatever pleasure or intimacy she might find ... it would not be this. This night, this man ... were singular.

A sharp tenderness welled up in her, looking up at him. And a sense of lightness—a complete surrender to the position he now had her in, quite pinned to the floor. I would show you no mercy, he’d said. There was a dark delicacy in that. Placing

herself in his hands. Trust me. She hadn't trusted many in her lifetime—why would she? Her father was unscrupulous, the ton were snakes, and men who came courting pled interest in her, when she knew their hearts were set only on money and connections.

But she did trust the duke.

He must have seen it in her expression. Because his eye widened, and a flush came over his face. His scar stood out white against the deeper color. And something in his gaze softened.

“Please,” she whispered. Inviting him.

He guided his cock to her lips, and she parted them. He eased the tip into her mouth. The skin was velvet and very warm, and tasted clean, a little salty. She caught a drop of moisture on the tip of her tongue, and swirled it around the crown.

He groaned. Watching her intently. “That’s it. Take a little more.”

He slid farther in, holding himself at the base with one hand, gently cradling her head with the other. She ran her tongue under the ridge of the crown, and he shuddered out a breath, and tensed his whole body against the pleasure of it.

And suddenly she understood for the first time that power was a shifting, layered, slippery thing. He was atop her. Pushing his cock slowly into her mouth—a tableau in which one could easily mistake her for powerless, entirely submissive to his will.

She was far from that.

Every slick caress of her tongue. Every change in pressure from her lips. The effect her slightest movement had on him was fascinating in its ferocity. Was this not

power?

It was fair to say that she was at his mercy. But he was also very much at hers.

And she loved it. The coarse intimacy of it. Feeling him, smelling the clean musk of him, learning the things that made him tremble.

He was holding himself still now, breathing tightly, his face a mask of concentration, of thinly restrained need.

“Can you take more of me, beauty?” She responded by opening wider, inviting more of him in. Filling her mouth with him. He moaned. Then took her hands in his, moved them to the outsides of his thighs.

“Hold me here. If it is too much ... ” He squeezed his hands over hers, showing her what to do, how to alert him to ease back.

Now he moved both of his hands to cradle her head. “More,” he said, voice thick, and she sucked him, lay her tongue flat and full against the underside of him, as he began to move in and out. “Sweet Christ,” he muttered. “Yes, like ... God, like that ... ”

She glided her hands up his thighs, around to feel his hard buttocks, as he moved faster, shallower, in and out of her mouth. The indecency of it made her feel hot and liquid everywhere.

“That sinful mouth ...” He said, his voice tight, his hips moving rhythmically, his buttocks flexing under her hands. “ ... you have me ... so close ...” A growl tore from him. “How ... shall I give you my seed, pet?” Wickedness lit his face as he stroked a hand over her cheek, still sliding his cock in and out in short, quick movements. He ran his finger over her stretched lower lip. “Here? Will you drink me? Or will I paint your pretty face?”

She knew she should find his words appalling, but they thrilled her. Her cunt throbbed. She wanted to hear more. Even as she wanted to drive him beyond words.

So she was pleased to see he was struggling to speak, struggling to ride the edge of control. “So ... good ...” he rasped, his fingers clenching her hair as he pushed in deeper, giving her as much of him as she could take.

And then he was abruptly pulling away from her, taking his deeply flushed cock in hand, stroking fast as he knelt over her. “Watch me, angel,” he whispered, his breath jagged.

As if she could tear her eyes away. He stroked hard, root to tip, twice, thrice, and then, with a shuddering groan, threw his head back, beautiful one-eyed creature, god of pleasure, as he found his release, his seed falling hot over her breasts.

He let his head drop, panting. Swaying. Exhausted from the bliss.

Arabella sat up. Feeling his liquid cooling on her skin. Her pulse was dancing fast. She felt unaccountably moved, to have seen him in his surrender.

He blew out an exhale. And looked at her, taking in what he had done. He raised a hand to her breasts, trailing his fingers through the pearly wet on her skin.

“Why is it, with men,” he said, wry, “that we cannot stop at taking pleasure. That we need to mark you. To make you ours.”

He’d meant it lightly, but hearing the words sobered him. His face was serious, contemplative, as he moved his fingers over her breast, spreading his sticky wetness over it.

And then he was pulling her into his lap like she weighed nothing at all. Pressing her

naked body, her breasts slippery with him, against his bare chest. Burying his face in her neck.

She wrapped her arms around him. Felt her heart squeeze.

This was the problem. She'd fancied herself enamored of the fierce, piratical duke when she first met him as a girl of fifteen. She had fantasized about earning the intensity of his gaze. And then she grew up, and her father made a deal with the man, and she discovered he was cold, and distant, and, in his polite way, harsh; he was nothing like the romantic, scarred figure she'd dreamed about. She realized she'd been a silly child. She had fallen in love with a man she'd made up in her head.

But this man.

Naked, warm, damp, pressing his scarred cheek into her shoulder as he breathed in the scent of her hair, his strong, still-trembling arms tight around her— this man.

He was real. He was right here. And he was not cold. Not at all. He was hot, and frightening, and rough, and gentle, and, deep under the surface, full of feeling. And she wanted this reality so much more than that fantasy.

Just a few hours left , she thought. And it was a knife.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

Nick ran his fingers through Arabella's hair, twirling a coil around his fingers. She was curled into his lap on the settee, still naked, as he was, under the blanket he'd wrapped around them both. They were both relaxed and in very fine humor now. They'd had a bit more port, and he had washed the traces of his release from her skin with a soft cloth. She was quiet. Absorbing what had just happened.

He could not stop touching her. Hair, cheek. The skin of her palm, then her inner wrist, skating up to her elbow. He was very aware that she held an entire world inside that deceptively petite form. A deep, layered, richly rewarding world, it must be, to drive her to throw her comfortable life away without a glance back.

"When did you know," he asked her, "what it meant to you?"

"Painting?" she asked. He nodded. "Even as a child, I enjoyed it. But I think ... I was perhaps twelve." She gave a small sigh at the memory, seemed to be weighing whether to say more.

He waited. And finally, she continued. "My father had gone into one of his rages. A deal had fallen through. He is a ... volatile man."

Nick's arms tightened on her of their own accord. "Did he raise a hand to you?"

"No," she said, matter-of-factly. "But the book he threw only narrowly missed."

Anger flared in Nick. "Still —"

She shrugged. "I was very young when my mother died, but I remember how loving

she was. I know how it feels, to be loved. And so I understood very quickly that my father was simply not capable of it. His heart, such as it was, had set itself on very particular aspects of life—status, money, victory —and all the rest of us were either helping or in the way.”

It gave Nick a peculiar tightness in the throat to hear her speak so calmly, so easily about the lovelessness of her childhood. “I am sorry you were alone.”

“A great many children are,” she said, evenly. “And that’s the secret. When I discovered what drawing could do, what it could ... unlock, for me ... I wasn’t alone anymore. A day came—as I said, twelve, perhaps eleven. Father had frightened me. I was in my room, with a chair wedged under the doorknob. It wouldn’t have stopped him, I suppose, if he’d really wanted to burst in, but he never bothered—there were servants he could so easily rage over with less effort. In those times, I hid for hours and hours—a whole day and night, sometimes. But on this day, I’d made a grievous error.” He was stroking her hair now, and she leaned her head into his hand, encouraging him. “I’d put all my books back in the library, and I had none at all to read. Nothing.”

“Prison,” he murmured. Understanding now why her sensitivity to being locked away might be so high.

“Indeed. That—is remarkable,” she sighed, as his thumbs found the muscle where her neck met her shoulder and begin to knead. She let out a sigh of deep pleasure.

“Have a care. If you make those sounds, I won’t be able to let you finish the story,” he warned into her ear.

She laughed, making a show of composing herself, even as her body melted under his fingers’ firm ministrations.

“Prison,” he said again, prompting her.

“Yes,” she said. “All I had was a sketchbook, and some rather pathetic bits of charcoal. At first, I sort of ... scribbled. A girl is never permitted to rage in life, of course, and I felt a good deal of relief, allowing myself to be angry and ugly on the page. No—don’t stop.”

He’d stilled his hands unconsciously, absorbed in her words. He moved them now, finding the knots in her shoulder. “Continue,” he murmured.

“After a time, I felt calmer. But I ... couldn’t leave the room yet. I caught sight of myself in the mirror above my washstand, then. I looked very ... like a ghost, was my thought. Pale and lank, hair a fright, and my eye was very red and beginning to bruise—”

“You said he did not hit you,” Nick interrupted sharply.

She paused. Then admitted, “The book did not entirely miss.”

“Arabella.” He turned her head to his. What did one say, upon discovering the old, secret pain hidden inside another? Her eyes were frank, without self-pity, but it seemed clear to Nick that she’d never spoken of this before, to anyone.

He could not find the right words. And so, instead, he pressed his lips very gently under one eye.

“Was it here?” She nodded once, surprised. He brushed his lips over the skin, so lightly, as if to erase what had been there. A tiny sound, almost a whimper, escaped her throat.

He repeated the kiss under the other eye. Then over each eyebrow. Each corner of her



lips. Her temples. Her eyelids.

He knew violence. He knew it because he was capable of it—because there were many times in his life that had required inordinate self-control not to unleash it. The rumor mill relished the notion of the Beast of Blackflint as a man who'd snapped so violently he'd killed his wife, but in truth he'd never raised a hand to a woman, and he'd never been first to raise one to a man.

Except once. Once, he had indulged in darkest impulse. And he certainly had the scars to show for that .

Now, in this moment, his only desire was to soothe. He brushed his lips over her chin, then lifted her hand and pressed a kiss into the palm.

When he looked up, her eyes were bright. “Is this what happens when one takes a man’s cock in one’s mouth? He is suddenly very kind?” A hint of a smile, now.

He stroked her cheek. “Only when a woman’s mouth is very wicked,” he replied.

“Ah. You liked it, then.”

“I am aware I gave no sign. But yes.”

She burst out laughing. He wanted to kiss her hard then, to move her arse over his cock so she could feel it spring again to full stiffness, then take her here on the settee. He wanted to meet all the desire and tenderness and wit and pain with his own, as deep inside her as he could.

But he also wanted to stay here, wrapped in a blanket with her legs curled over his, exactly as they were right now. And he wanted to hear the rest of her story.

“I interrupted you,” he said. To show her he wanted to listen, he moved his hands back to her shoulders. “Please go on. The mirror.”

“Ah. Yes.” She thought a moment. “I looked a terror, but I was certainly the most interesting thing in that room. So I decided to draw myself. It wasn’t the first time I’d attempted a self-portrait ... but also, it was. Because I told the truth.”

“You drew the bruise.”

“I drew every imperfection. And I tried to capture the expression in my eyes, which was, of course, above the level of skill I possessed. But I felt compelled to try.” She sighed approvingly as he moved his massaging fingers to her back. “And then,” she went on, “I had the oddest impulse. To draw my father. Exactly as he was.”

She paused a moment, remembering. “It was not a comfortable thing. To be ... honest with what I had beheld. But it had an unexpected effect. In my mind, you see, when I ran from my father, he was huge, all-powerful. Twenty feet tall, with lightning bolts flying from his fingertips. But gradually, drawing him, I started to see—he was a man. Only that. A cruel man, deeply flawed, and in a certain light, pitiable. After all, he had every advantage in life, and what was he doing? Chasing a little girl down a hallway, screaming at her. He was, in spirit, smaller than I was.”

Arabella looked at Nick over her shoulder, a thoughtful expression on her face. “It is a gift I have carried with so much gratitude. To know that if I look deeply at someone, for as long as it takes, sometimes the surface of them will start to fall away, and I will begin to see their soul.”

Nick had the sudden thought that in this moment, he was seeing hers. Quietly dazzling, deep as the ocean.

She shifted in his lap, to face him more fully. “It is ironic, I think, my telling you all

this.”

“How so?”

“Because I have sketched you several times over the years, and I have looked at you perhaps more than you know.”

“Is that so?” he asked, fighting a smile.

“Yes. I fancied you quite ardently. And I did not see you at all.”

She lifted her fingers to his face. He thought she would stroke his cheek. But instead, she gently touched his scar.

He stiffened.

“Let me,” she whispered.

She’d shared something profound with him, and it felt somehow unfair not to return the trust. Worse, it felt cowardly.

He nodded. Tense, but allowing her to trace the knotted track over his cheek.

“I think I saw only the whispers when I looked at you. A storybook villain.”

“Beast, I hear, is a popular term,” he said.

“It set me quite aflutter,” she said, with a self-deprecating smile. “The dark duke with one eye. All danger and ice. Old enough to know everything. No heart, utterly unfeeling. Will he kiss me or kill me?” She gave an embarrassed laugh. “I imagine you attract your share of that.”

He shrugged. He'd always been amused by it, in a detached sort of way. The fervid attentions of half-frightened, half-titillated women seemed one of the more intriguing side effects of allowing his reputation to continue.

"But now I think I see you."

He almost did not ask. He felt an uneasiness under her gaze.

But he also wanted to know. "What do you see?"

She leaned in now, as he had. Kissed his smooth cheek. And then brushed a kiss over the ropy skin of the scar.

"I think you do feel. But ... you seem to have chosen to be completely alone. And that is why you seek a duchess you have no intention of knowing, nor allowing her to know you." She leaned back, meeting his gaze. "And I think you must have good reason for it."

He said nothing. He knew it was all over his face.

She lay a cool hand on his bare chest. "You do have one in there. I can feel it beating. Funny, it doesn't feel cold at all."

A long moment spun out between them. She regarded him with gently probing eyes. Finally, she asked. "Would you answer if I asked what happened?"

He would do anything she asked right now. But he could not imagine talking about it. Not without breaking in half.

He brought her hand to his mouth, and kissed each fingertip. "We are not the same," he said. "I cannot run away from my life. I'm the Duke of Blackflint. Hundreds of

people rely on me. I cannot afford to ... to—”

“Let someone see you?”

“To be anything but strong, always.”

“It’s only me—only this cottage, this night—”

“It took a good deal of time and no small effort to lock that door, Arabella. I cannot simply fling it open.”

“I understand. I merely . . .”

He kissed her wrist. “I know. You are kindhearted.”

“I think there is a power in it. Telling someone what you carry. I believe it makes the burden lighter, in the end.” She leaned down, and dropped a kiss on his chest, just beneath the long, raised scar above his heart. “But you’re right. I am not a duke. And after everything you have done for me, helping me ... I could not possibly press you to give me anything more.”

Nick shook his head, deflecting the sentiment. “I’ve given you nothing but what should be yours—your own life.”

“Many men would not do that,” she said, letting her fingers find his jaw, trace the line of it.

A new thought brought a hint of a smile to Arabella as she reached his ear and followed its curve with her finger. Her gaze had gone hot. “And yet I fear I must impose upon you once more.”

He knew before she spoke it what she meant. He felt himself stir under her hip.

“I find myself in a generous mood,” he said, his voice dipping low. “Ask.”

A blush blossomed on her cheeks. She took his hands, guided them up her body, to her breasts, so that he cupped them. “Show me more,” she whispered.

He brushed his palms over her nipples. “How much do you wish to know?”

She shifted in his lap, to straddle him. Her sex against his cock, pressing her wet heat into him.

“Everything,” she said.

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

Once Nick kissed Arabella, things began to move very quickly. Her hand was on his cock as he kissed down her neck, rolling her nipples between thumb and forefinger, pinching hard enough to draw a gasp. He pressed a kiss to her right breast, then took the nipple in his mouth, teasing the tip with his tongue. He was rewarded with a moan of pure impatience. “Nick ...”

He kissed his way back to her ear. Her skin was hot now. He slipped a hand between their bodies, finding her cunt, pressing the heel of his hand against her clitoris. “Do you want me to fuck you, Arabella?”

Her breath hitched, and she nodded. She gripped his shoulder with her free hand, digging the nails in, as she gave his length a squeeze.

He licked, then nibbled her earlobe, moving his hand against her, giving her friction. She leaned into his hand, began to move her hips so sensually that it took everything in him not to push her to the floor and mount her.

“I want to oblige you,” he whispered in her ear. “Very, very badly.”

“Please,” she said, in the tone she’d learned sent the blood racing to his cock.

He gathered her wetness on his fingers, and stroked them over her clitoris in insistent, focused circles. His breath uneven in her ear. “I want to be inside you. All the way in you. I want to give you every inch.”

“Nick—do it now—”

“No, pet. I need you ready.” Her hips were moving mindlessly in the rhythm of his fingers. “I need you as wet, and soft, and open as you can be for me.”

She turned her head, met his mouth with her own, her tongue finding his at once, satiny but insistent, as if to give him exactly what he demanded— wet, soft, open. He groaned, and the kiss became a battle, her need and his meeting, fighting, merging.

He kept the rhythm of his fingers on her clitoris, and with his other hand, took hers from his cock. He pushed it under his own, onto her slippery sex. “Pleasure yourself,” he told her, his voice fraying with want, “While I give you a taste of it.” And he slid two fingers into her cunt.

Her eyes flew open, and their gazes locked, their faces very close, ragged breath breaking over each other as he moved his fingers deep and fast, and her hand moved faster. “Yes,” he whispered. “Keep those brilliant eyes on me.”

She bit her lip, engulfed in the rising sensation. Eyes still trained to him, heavy-lidded now, glittering.

He fucked her deeply with his fingers, watching every hitch, every sensation. Seeing the pleasure rise in her, overwhelming.

“Let me have it, pet,” he whispered. “Come apart for me.”

Her moans rose higher, cracked, and she fought to keep her gaze on his as the wave hit its peak and released, flooding her, shaking her whole body. She pressed her slick cunt hard into his hand.

And then she fell against him, limp, sweaty, still trembling.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her there a moment, feeling the full weight



of her, feeling her cunt, swollen, so very slippery and hot against his cock.

“Good God. Nick, ” she murmured into his shoulder. Then raised her head to look at him. Her eyes two clear, bright universes.

“You are always beautiful,” he said, winding his hands into her hair. “But in your pleasure, you are a goddess.”

“Mmm,” she smiled dreamily. “I like that. Not your lover. Your goddess.”

Arabella was playful, and Nick wanted to match her tone, but he felt the weight of it deeper inside him. “Yes,” he said softly. “Exactly that.”

She slid her hand down his body, and found his cock. “Then this belongs to me.”

“I’d be a fool to deny it.”

She braced her other hand on his shoulder, and rose up on her knees. Sliding his cock over her, now. A tremor ran through him, and he had to fight to keep from flexing his hips.

She notched the head of him to the incredible wet heat of her opening. He stopped breathing.

Gripping his shaft, she pressed down over him, until she had taken his head inside her tightness. She breathed out on a sound of discovery, feeling it.

“Yes,” he said, watching, holding himself as still as he could, letting her adjust.

She slid down a little farther. Another inch. He bit back a groan. He was trembling, now, with the effort it took not to pump into her.

A flush spread over her. Her brow furrowed in concentration. "I am realizing," she whispered to him, "with some concern, that you ... are very large."

He gave a low chuckle. Smoothed his hands down her bare back. "Slowly, then."

"I'm not sure if I can . . ."

"You can," he promised, stroking her hips. "You're going to take all of me, beauty. I am going to fuck you so sweetly. You'll see how we fit. You'll feel it." He held her with one hand at the waist, to steady her, and the other he pressed between her breasts, to the warm skin. "I have you, pet."

Something deepened in her gaze. Some tension unknotting and letting go. She pushed down, taking more of him in. Sweet mercy, she was tight. By strength of will, he held perfectly still as she took a breath, raised up, then eased down with a whimper, taking half of him.

She put both hands on his shoulders, now. Quivering as she held herself there for a long moment, half-impaled on his cock.

He ran his hands along her body, dropped tiny kisses along her clavicle. "So sweet," he murmured. "You're flaying me alive with this tight little cunt, you know." She gave a breathy laugh. She was trembling with the effort of holding herself up over him. "Come now, Bella. Take all of me." Her eyes widened. "Take me," he urged. "So I can make love to you. Let me have you now."

She inhaled deep. And let her weight drop onto him, taking him to the hilt with a surprised hiss.

He heard pain in it. He brought a hand to her face as she blinked, feeling everything.

She looked to him, overwhelmed. He did not move inside her, though the velvet grip of her was unbearable, impossible, purpose-made to drive him mad.

“It’s ...” She raised up a little, experimentally, then moved down over him again. The feel of her—the need to fuck up into her, now— he shut his eye against it so hard he saw stars on the backs of his eyelid.

She did it again, lifting higher, then sliding down. “ Oh.”

The sound she made was wonder—understanding and need, an edge of pain shimmering into something else, something she wanted more of.

He looked down, to where they were joined. He had to fuck her. Had to . Now.

He bit back the urge. He would give her what she needed.

She moved on him again, testing, feeling him in her. “It feels . . . it’s so . . . I want it.”

He took her hips and moved her, gliding her back and forth over him, showing her the motion.

She repeated it, sending a cascade of harsh pleasure through him. “That’s it.”

She moved, finding a rhythm. She gripped his shoulders, biting her lip as she felt the sensations of him.

She paused. “Nick . . . I want . . .”

“Anything.”

“Take me,” she breathed.

He could have come right then. He felt a wicked smile curve his mouth. “Temptress. Siren.”

He hooked an arm behind her back and carefully lowered her onto the settee. Lowered himself over her, and guided his cock into her.

He eased all the way out, then slowly pushed back in to the hilt. Eliciting a surprised noise high in her throat. He paused, looking down at her, trying to read if he had hurt her. He could not help it—the worry.

“It’s ...” her eyes were wide. “It’s extraordinary.” She wrapped her arms around him and pulled his weight onto her. “More,” she said in his ear.

He moved again, and again, trying to keep the rhythm slow, easy, fighting the mad hot impulse to push into her hard and fast. “Mother of Christ, the feel of you,” he gritted.

Abruptly, she put her hands on his cheeks, pulling him to look at her. Her eyes fiercer, now. “Nick.”

She wanted . . . something. “Tell me.”

“You are holding back.”

He slowed. “Bella, it’s your first—”

“I’m not made from glass. Let me feel all of you. Let me meet you there.”

He felt a surge run through him—desire and panic—

“I was promised a merciless devouring.” A playful look lit her eyes. “I submit.”

Those words bypassed his hesitation, pulled a feral sound from him, even as she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper into her. Yes.

When he allowed himself to move faster, she met his rhythm immediately. Urging him, welcoming it. Meeting her like this, stronger, more demanding, felt right, necessary. Closer to the truth. The tight control he'd kept over himself frayed.

Then, abruptly, it broke.

And he was driving into her, intent, the world gathering into a single, white-hot point of need. Her moans grew higher, sharper. Their joining became its own force. She moved her body with his, against his, a dance, a battle, a spell. A melding. He could feel her edges dissolving, feel himself becoming part of her with each sharp thrust, pulling separate, again becoming one. Their sounds filled the room, torn breath, voice, skin against skin, a storm as violent, powerful, total as the one outside.

“Nick . . . yes . . .” A raw, hungry note he'd never heard in her voice before.

He bent his head to taste her, take her moans into his mouth. “You like that,” he whispered, ragged. “When I take what I need.”

“Yes ... take it .” The words were a command, Arabella taking even as he did. And all at once, taking his pleasure was one and the same with giving it, giving her what she demanded, serving it to her, serving her. And that lit him afire, made him wild.

Take it. He pulled her hands from his body, pushed them over her head and pinned them to the settee, hard, and she pushed against his grip, trying to get closer to him, twisting her body to meet his. He held both her wrists in one hand, pushed the other down her body. “I need to feel you shatter around me,” he said against her lips. He stroked her clitoris as he plunged into her, and her moans rose until they were high, cracked cries. “I need to feel it,” he rasped. “Angel ... goddess ... Come around my

cock. Drench me with it.”

Her cries became a keen, and her back arched. “ Nick —” His hips moved faster, deeper as she shook, gasping his name. He could feel the pulse of her climax squeezing his length, and that sent him over the edge, his hips relentless, frantic, drumming as he pressed his face into her neck, let the jasmine and salt of her hair envelop him, drown him in her scent, kill him and send him to heaven. He buried his cock deep inside her as his release shook him over and over and over.

And then it was quiet. Only the sounds of their harsh breathing, and the snap of the fire, and the rain beating steadily on the roof.

Nick slowly came back to himself. Realized he was sprawled heavily over Arabella, one arm and leg hanging over the edge of the settee.

With some effort, he lifted himself up on his arms. He gave a short, sharp laugh at their cramped and tangled position. “The ridiculous thing of it is—there’s a bed right there ,” he said, and moved to extricate himself from her and sit up.

Her eyes were closed. A smile had shimmered over her at his dry remark, then faded. She lay there, breathing deeply, her attention internal, on all the sensations in her body.

He watched. He could, he thought, watch her like this forever.

When he saw her brow furrow, ever so slightly, he soothed a hand over her cheek and held it.

And then tears were leaking from under both lids, trailing down her cheeks.

He froze. Waiting to see what she’d do. Would she shrink from him? Run?

But she stayed as she was. Tiny hitches in her breathing. Tears flowing.

“Bella,” he said softly. “Sweetheart.”

“All is well,” she said shakily, without opening her eyes. “All is very, very well. It’s only ...” But she couldn’t speak, because she was crying.

A deep softness for her welled up in him. Understanding. What they’d just shared was not small for him either. It defied easy definition, the depth of their joining.

He stroked her wet cheek. “Can I hold you? Come, let me. It’s all right.” He took her hand, gently coaxing her to him.

She sat up, and put her face into his bare shoulder, and let out a sob. He stroked the back of her neck, under her damp hair.

“I’m fine. I’m well,” she insisted into his shoulder.

“Oh, I know.” He gave a quiet laugh. “Now you see how people rally entire armies over it. Fight wars. Abandon all reason. Ruin their lives.”

She lifted her head to look at him. The tears were abating now. Her eyes were huge and very clear in the flickering light. “Everything I thought it would be ... still, it was—I didn’t realize it was also ...so profound. I am at a loss to understand how people manage to discuss anything but the wonder of it, ever.”

He shrugged lightly. “It’s not always like that.”

“No?” She searched his face.

“No,” he said, quieter. He took her warm hand in his. “But then, we established that

you are no ordinary mortal woman.”

She quirked a smile at that. “You’re teasing me.”

He shook his head. “It felt ... rather like worship.” He said it matter-of-factly.

She sat back, absorbing this, her hand still tight in his. For a moment, they sat there like that, side by side, naked, watching the shift of the fire’s light and shadow on the floor.

“To think I could have lived my entire life and never felt it,” she murmured. “Like never hearing music. Or tasting sugar. And to think I might never have had the chance to see you like that.” She threw him a sidewise look under lashes. “You’re ... glorious.”

He shrugged. “I was inspired.”

“I could draw you now,” she said, with a laugh. Then she turned to him, to regard him thoughtfully. “Actually ... I rather want to, if you’d let me.”



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

The duke had thrown his shirt on, but lost interest in dressing further before he even got to the buttons. Seated so casually in the chair, mostly nude, port glass dangling from his fingertips, he brought to mind a debauched conqueror in repose. The fire threw light and shadow over the lean musculature of his legs and abdomen, the knotted ribbons of his scars. His eye was closed, head slightly tilted, a serene expression on his face. He was listening to the rain.

Arabella had wrapped a blanket around herself, and sat on the floor. She drew with her sketchbook on her knee. She'd decided to begin with a quick full-length sketch of him, to loosen her hand.

"That cannot be comfortable," he said, without opening his eye. "Sitting on the ground. Without even a pillow or a duke under you."

"I work best like this," she said. "I told you I make a poor excuse for a lady."

He smiled a private smile. "Mmm."

"You're thinking of me in some compromising position, aren't you?"

"Quite the opposite." He sounded supremely self-satisfied. "I am recalling how regal you were. Atop me. An empress demanding her pleasure."

"Odd. In my recollection, you were the insistent one. Was there not, at a juncture, something to do with begging you to make me come apart?"

He arched a brow. "Don't do that."

“Do?”

“Flirt, pet. I need a bit of grace before I could possibly oblige you again.”

“Perfect. Because I like indulging in this as well.” And her body was pleasantly tired, a warm soreness between her thighs. Sitting with her legs stretched under a blanket and a pencil in her hand, bantering with Nick as he submitted to her gaze, suited her perfectly, for the moment.

Arabella worked on blocking in the angles of his shoulders. She gave him a long look, taking in his posture. “How old were you when you became the duke?” she asked.

“Twenty-six,” he said. “Do you ask because when your sketch hits the scandal sheets, it’ll destroy my family name?”

“Oh, rest assured, no persuasion could compel me to surrender it. All renderings of ducal cock go straight into a vault guarded by dragons.”

“I hope the dragons are well paid.”

“Of course. But in truth, I ask because ... even relaxed as you seem now—”

“Oh, I am,” he murmured.

“You never truly slouch. There is ... an alertness about you. Your posture. It’s not the same as tension. But a sense of ... readiness.”

He considered her assessment. “My father put me through my paces from a young age. Preparing me for the title. Even as a child—if he was awoken in the night, he woke me and took me along.”

“Did that happen frequently?”

“More than one might think. Business associates would not hesitate to bang down the door at any hour. More than that, though, everyone looked to him—farmers, villagers, staff and their families. He felt it important to always know what was happening on his lands, and to be of service. If there was a fire, or an accident, or if a child went missing—that happened a few times. I think people imagine a duke to be all extravagance and perversity, perhaps the occasional murder without consequence. But it is, in truth, a vocation.” He shrugged. “And I suppose I am suited to it.”

“By your shoulders, yes.”

She drew for a long moment, thinking better of saying the next words that had come to her mind. The fire cracked in the fireplace. The silence in the room felt cozy, right.

Then she said them anyway. “And by the amount you are willing to give up.”

He seemed to still. “I want for nothing.”

It would be silly to argue, so she kept drawing.

“Bella, Bella,” he scolded softly. “You deceived me, with all that wantonness.”

“Beg pardon?”

“You act the sybarite. But underneath, you’re dreadfully compassionate. How will you survive among your coterie of painters sacrificing all to the muse, if you spend your time secretly fretting that they might be lonely?”

“Artists are different. They can drink and rut it all away. You live your life ready to be pulled from bed at any wretched hour because someone’s barn is on fire.”

“Ah. So it’s my disturbed sleep that worries you.”

“I am not worried ,” she said, turning the page. She had decided she was ready to begin the portrait.

“Don’t be too kindhearted. You will need all your resources to care for yourself out there .”

“I was not offering to care for anyone else. I was only observing.”

All business now, she scooted closer. She spent a long moment taking in the shapes and shadows.

He watched her watching him, curious.

She lightly sketched in the basic lines, pausing frequently to observe his face. Then, she began the real work of bringing the portrait to life.

“All those times I sketched you, as a girl,” she said as she worked. “I was wrong about so many things.”

“Such as?”

“Your mouth is sensual, not sinister. Your eyes are green, not black as the Devil’s.”

“Well. The one.”

“And the scar on your cheek is not so fearsome, up close. It’s ...” She searched for the right words.

“A pity,” he said dryly.

“Not at all. Now that I’ve been disabused of the notion that you got it rampaging in a duel, I imagine—what happened, it was awful, and you survived it.” She saw his expression darken and said quickly, “I am not asking. I do not even wish to know.”

“I see,” he said. “Curious about every inch of my body, save the one with the mysterious scar.” He tried to peer at her work. “Are you trying to hide it from me?” She’d tipped the sketchbook up.

“As one does with a work in progress. Have you never sat for a portrait?”

“Several. Always hated it.”

“Do you hate it now?”

“I thought I might. But I find I rather desperately crave your close attention.” The way he said it, with no hint of irony, caught her off guard. She found he was regarding her with an extraordinary look on his face. Open, serious.

“You have it,” she said. “Completely.”

He came out of the chair then, and leaned down to kiss her. Slowly, fully, her face in his hands. Less to take pleasure or to rouse her, and more as though he was saying something to her in the most direct way he could.

He broke the kiss gradually, smoothing his hands over her cheeks, her hair. And he sat back in the chair.

She sat there for a moment, unable to resume her work. Unable to lift her eyes from the paper.

She was feeling something she had never felt before and had no name for, expanding

in the center of her chest. An emotion that was discovery and joy and grief all at once.

I could love him.

In a way, she already did—she had for years, childishly, without knowing him. But now she did know him, just a little. Just enough to know. That she could. She could open her heart to him like opening a window and letting all the light and fresh air and birdsong in the world rush into her little room.

When she finally lifted her gaze, he was watching her with a conflicted, sympathetic expression.

Neither of them said anything. What was there to say? The morning would come. The rain would stop. She would go.

Or you could stay with him.

But he had already said it. He was glad she'd run, that she'd revealed her true nature to him. She had spared him. He knew what he required in a wife. Even the way they met in their passion—he had made it clear that this was not how he'd conduct himself. He did not want a love match. My marriage will not be that . Something for you to consider .

It had been a gorgeous, slippery dream, joining with him. Drinking port in his lap. Sitting here at his feet, capturing the faint cleft in his chin with her pencil.

She wouldn't destroy it by pushing for anything else. She would let this night be this beautiful, singular, night.

And then she would let him go.

She picked up her pencil and resumed her work.

Arabella worked steadily for nearly an hour, and Nick sat, outwardly placid, in his own thoughts. The rain slowed for a few minutes, then picked up again with new ferocity.

She took her time with his expression. It had changed since she'd started the portrait. It had been inquisitive, droll. Now, there was a melancholy in it.

She remembered Monsieur Allard's admonition. Less timid. She worked the shadows deeper.

"She died in childbirth," he said.

Arabella nodded. She did not dare look at him. He sounded calm, had said it simply, yet she sensed that if she met his gaze, he would not be able to continue. But if she continued to work, acted as though they were having a normal conversation, he might say more.

"The baby too. A son. As the doctor said, these things happen."

"I am so very sorry," she whispered. She was working on shading the scar, now. The pattern told the story of someone sewing flayed tissue together hastily, unevenly.

It reminded her of an old atlas in her father's library. A border had shifted since its printing, and someone had heavily slashed out the old one with black ink, and scrawled in the new one in a way that obscured some of the land's topography. The scar was like that—it crossed out the enthusiastic young man he'd been, replacing him with a cold duke dressed all in black. Crossed out the besotted young husband in favor of a man who sought a second wife he'd send away as quickly as possible.

“I loved her. We were young and there were cracks in it, but in enough ways, we suited. And everything—decisions, duty—was so much easier. Something I didn’t realize, of course, until after. Fair to say I fell apart. My father had taken ill while she was pregnant, and—it never even occurred to me that I might not have her with me when I inherited.”

She worked more shadow into his hair. Making the silver stand out brighter. He was enough her senior, and always such a model of pensive, inscrutable restraint, that it hadn’t occurred to her that those streaks of gray had actually come early.

“We’d planned for her to give birth in the country. Where my mother had given birth to me. But the babe chose otherwise while we were still in London. It was obvious fairly quickly that all was not well. It was not progressing, and Beatrice had gone very pale and weak. A doctor came quickly, of course—benefits of the city—and he was the finest. Much of the royal family was seen by this man.”

Nick’s voice was hollow, as if he were recounting a story he’d read about someone else.

“I didn’t grasp at first what was happening—they kept me out of the room—but I saw a look pass between two of the maids. And so after it all turned a nightmare, I cornered one, frightened the girl into the grave, but she eventually spit out words to the effect that the doctor was very clearly in his cups when he arrived, and could not hold a scalpel steady. Not quite the ideal condition to cut a baby from his mother’s womb, if keeping either alive is the intent.”

Arabella realized she was staring at his bare foot, tapping rhythmically as he told the story. The rest of his body was so still.

She lifted her eyes to his face. His expression was stone, but when she met his gaze, his breath faltered and he swallowed hard. She could see the pulse beating in his



throat.

“I know,” he said, with a sardonic edge. “I haven’t actually answered your question yet. It’s the eye you wanted to know about, isn’t it?”

“I want to know all of it,” she said. “I asked because I want to know you.”

He shook his head. “You sweet girl. Thank God we won’t marry.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I went mad, Arabella. I had given my heart and a foxed bloody surgeon killed her, and it’s a miracle I didn’t kill him, and the maids, and the bloody King of England. I wanted to. I planned to kill that man. I don’t know if he left because he knew or he tumbled drunk onto a ship to America, but by the time I could pull myself together, he was gone.” He smiled a grim, dark smile unlike any she’d seen from him before. “So I decided to do the next best thing.”

Her stomach dipped at the expression on his face. “Nick—you needn’t—”

“No, I ought to tell you,” he said. “So you understand it’s nothing to do with you. If I were made soundly, I’d marry you. I’d love you. I would be a fool not to.” Whatever look was on her face, his filled with something regretful and knowing. “I cannot.”

“Why not?”

“The doctor was nowhere. My father was dying. My wife and son were in the ground. And ... I could not abide that when my father did die, I would instantly become responsible for a staggering number of people, their livelihoods, their futures. I was alone, pile of ash in my chest, terrified I’d destroy anything I touched. I was blindered by the agony. And of a mind to end it. I went to the docks. My reasoning was that it

would be deserted, and I would not be disturbed, gathering rocks, throwing myself in. Done with it.”

“Nick,” she whispered. She went to him, knelt in front of the chair, took his hands.

“You see?” He squeezed her hands. “Too kindhearted. Deeply impractical for you.”

“Stop it.” She ran her thumbs over his. “To think of you in a state like that. Alone.”

His smile was harsh. “I haven’t told you the best part. Do you know what stopped me? Common, shit-stinking ruffians, with cheap knives. Looking to pick an easy pocket. They didn’t even care to hurt me. I could have handed them my money and been on my way. Instead, I told them their mothers were syphilitic whores, and I took a swing at the biggest of the lot. I vividly recollect the sound of his nose breaking—my only joy, that night. But in a matter of moments I was on the ground, sans money, signet, buttons, and left eye.”

He tapped the scar near the top of his chest. “This was one was just a slash, but this one,” he absently touched the one at his waistline, “properly qualified as a stabbing. I was losing blood quickly, to my profound relief.” He gave a mirthless laugh. “But as God does have a sense of humor, two policemen came at that moment, stopped the thieves putting me out of my misery, arrested the ones who didn’t run fast enough, and got me to a doctor who had only drunk a moderate amount that night.”

Arabella wished she knew the words to soothe the self-loathing from his face. “Grief is horrible,” she said softly.

“My broken heart made me suicidal,” he corrected her. “And I do not have the hubris to test if I would survive it twice.” He touched her cheek. “I won’t love again. I’m responsible for too much.”

It hurt, to hear him say it. But she could not pretend she didn't understand his reasoning.

"A shame," she said. "Because I think it would be strangely easy to love you, considering."

Her words seemed to touch something in him underneath the harshness. Something uncomfortable, something he'd rather push away. His tone was ironic when he replied. "You flatter me. Strangely, you say? Considering?"

She shrugged. "Considering that I am not blind. I can see there is—darkness in you. I have always seen it. I saw it when I was fifteen—"

"The storied cruelty of the cold-blooded Beast of Blackflint."

"Yes, I was very sapheaded, but I think I also ... sensed something more fundamental, though I could not have named it then."

She thought of him at their betrothal dinner, quietly watching Philip, seeing the man's secret pain. She thought of his expression when she spoke about her father, of the infinitely gentle way he'd kissed every part of her face that might once have borne a bruise.

She drew a deep breath. Knowing he might not like to hear it. "What you do, secretly, quietly, pretending to be stone, is the opposite of moving callously through the world. It is ... seeing it. Being affected by it, carrying it. The truth of things. At best, the beauty. But more often, the excruciating unfairness. The infuriating, incurable, moonless dark of the world." He gave her a sharply surprised look—because, she knew, she'd managed to capture it, in a way a stranger to the feeling couldn't possibly. "I can feel it when you touch me. Even look at me. And in the way you made love to me. The thing that drove you mad is the thing that enables you to truly

meet another. You have a very deep soul indeed, and life can be a cruel master for people with those.”

He seemed taken aback. “I am not convinced I’m all of that.”

She picked up her sketchbook, the now-finished portrait, and placed it on his lap.

She had caught him well, she knew, face half firelit, half in shadow. The thoughtful mien, the elegant wryness of his mouth, the direct, provocative gaze. The carefully-guarded sadness that suspended itself behind all of it.

He regarded the image for a long moment.

Finally, he blew out a slow exhale. “Well. The galleries of Paris will be lucky to have you.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:11 am*

The rain kept its rhythm and the fire burned low in the fireplace when Nick led Arabella to the bed, tucked her into the sheets, and doused the lamp.

There wasn't anything else to say. In the aftermath of telling his story, she had seen that stony calm descend over his features, seen the gaze go distant and internal.

He climbed in beside her in the dark, and bid her sweet dreams.

Arabella did not want to sleep. She did not want to lose the time. But then he pulled her into his chest, and stroked her hair. And it lulled her to sleep in moments.

Nick did not sleep.

A distant crack of thunder woke Arabella. She discovered herself warm in a soft bed, blankets and a strong arm over her. It was morning, though the room was dim, gray. The rain continued.

In a rush, the previous night came to her. And the knowledge that it was over.

Her eyes found a window. The rain was coming down at an angle. Eventually she'd have to go out into it, one way or another.

But not until it abated at least somewhat, surely.

It struck her as almost funny, how the duke had spoken of love. As if it were a dangerous storm a mile away, and the only thing for it was to never venture down that road and get caught.

Arabella had always imagined love as something that came upon one over time, gradually, like a lush plant growing from a tiny seed.

Lying here with his chest against her back, the even rise and fall of his breath in her hair, his legs tucked into the shape of hers, she realized it was already here. Like an ivy that had grown over her entire heart while she slept, enveloping it.

No, the opposite. Whatever had curtained her heart, protected it, had dissolved in the night, and now it was completely bare.

She could easily weep about it. She thought about waking him with that. He'd be soothing, hold her as long as she needed. Say things to make her laugh in spite of herself as she dressed and repacked her bag.

Or she could stay here. Absorb the feel of him beside her for a little longer.

Take a little more of him into her being, to carry with her into her next life.

She nestled into him, pressing closer.

His hand moved, coming up to stroke her hair. Perhaps he hadn't been asleep at all.

He moved her hair from her neck, and placed a kiss there. She reached back for him, to pull him closer.

His lips moved up her neck, to the soft place behind her ear. His breath was warm. She heard herself sigh.

His hand slid up her leg, up to her hip, gripped her there, firmer now.

She tipped her head back, and his mouth was on hers. Strange, how familiar the

contour of it felt on hers now, as though they'd always been lovers.

He kissed her slowly. Like trying to coax her out of a secret room. Like time was infinite.

When her hips began to shift restlessly, he pulled her leg over his hip. And then, smooth, easy, right, he glided himself into her.

She felt some soreness, some ache, but the motion of his cock also stirred her, and the angle awoke sensations in places inside her that she'd never felt.

He moved languidly, a hand holding her thigh, the other cupping her throat. His breath hitched in her ear.

She pitched back against him to fit him more deeply into her. He stroked into her cunt in slow waves. Her body tightened, the pleasure spiraling.

With a hiss, he pulled out of her, but before she could protest, he was on his back, pulling her onto him, taking his length in his hand and pressing it home. He clutched her hips, moving her over him as he fucked up into her, quicker now, more intent.

And then he pulled her face down to his, her sleep-and-sex-tangled hair cascading around him, to kiss her hard. Encouraging her own roughness as their tongues slid and met and fought. She moved faster, wanting friction, wanting to take control of this, to take him. She pulled his hands from her hips and pushed them down on the bed. Laced her fingers through his and held him, firmly.

The sound that Nick made was wild, dark, pleased.

Arabella lifted her head, to look down at him. His hair, silver threads glinting in the black, an utter mess. Face in the dim light hot with need, with the effort of enduring

how good this was, her body over his, riding him.

He met her gaze, raw.

He'd been right. It did feel like worship. Like he was offering up his body. He moved his hips to meet hers, and his cock inside her was worship too, winding the golden coil tighter, tighter, tight enough to snap.

Her release was sudden, whipping her back. He held her up at the waist, watching her with teeth gritted. And abruptly, came with her, his cock pulsing over and over inside her until they both collapsed, spent.

Once Arabella had caught her breath, she moved to roll off the duke. He clasped her tighter, then let her go.

She lay on her side, limbs loose, all her blood still alive with the energy of him, feeling his release leak, warm, out of her, onto her thighs.

He rolled to face her. He touched her cheek.

"Good morning, empress," he murmured.

His mouth quirked into a smile, but could not hold it.

Then he lifted his head, listening.

"The rain has stopped," he said.

The duke insisted on putting her in one of his carriages, though that required returning to his estate. He took her straight to the stable, dispatched his driver with instructions about where to stop for the night, and handed Arabella a letter to his



solicitor in Paris, who would help her get settled.

As for the wedding. Arabella had a moment of panic, realizing they'd need to discuss what Nick would tell everyone. Starting with her father.

To her surprise, he seemed almost amused. Her father, he assured her, would not be a problem once he was informed that their business agreement would shift such that an additional fifteen percent of profits would roll into his pocket. With one addendum—that the man not seek to find his daughter, return her to England, or contact her in any way without her express invitation.

“What I'd like to do is beat him viciously with every book in my library,” Nick had said, as if he were discussing breakfast. “But it is not, strictly speaking, my business to do so.”

Arabella didn't care to see her father harmed. But she was grateful, for now, to have him out of her life.

The greatest issue, in her view, was the damage she'd done to the duke himself. She offered several possible explanations for her disappearance, each less plausible than the last. Trying to find any alternative to the truth that she'd run away and left him.

There was no doubt of his amusement on this point. “Do I strike you,” he asked, “As a man concerned with keeping his reputation bright as new brass? You are alive, you're well, I let you go. I think I emerge from this more eligible than ever.” He ticked a shoulder in utter non-concern. “I'm not even convinced actually killing you would harm my search for a duchess,” he said dryly. “Not once they hear you were a tempestuous and wicked artist who wanted to leave me for a Frenchman.”

He seemed more inclined to argue, however, when she abruptly realized, aloud, that there was no reason to change her name now. She wasn't hiding anymore. She was

simply ... leaving.

“You might reserve that narrow road back.” He offered gently. “If the world hears only that you vanished, you could one day return.”

“I don’t want a road back,” she said. “My mother named me Arabella. I’d like to keep it.”

They said little else, once the logistics had been hashed out. He put her in the carriage. If she didn’t know him at all, she’d think his demeanor perfectly serene.

He leaned into the carriage. They did not touch. They did not speak.

And then he said goodbye and shut the door.

Paris

September 2, 1821

“Arabella Denton!” Grace’s voice rose to a squeal as she swept Arabella into her arms, then pushed her away to peer closely at her friend. “Lord mercy, look at you!”

Arabella thought her friend must mean the frock—far simpler than anything she’d ever ordered when they visited the modiste together in years past. She’d removed her painting smock to come to the door—another shock to Grace, no doubt, that Arabella’s servants counted precisely none.

“You look so . . . sophisticated.” Grace shook her head in delighted wonder.

Arabella stepped aside, inviting her friend into the building. Grace waved to the footman in her carriage—Arabella could see the pile of smartly wrapped packages stuffed inside from a fruitful morning’s hunt among the shops.

Grace followed Arabella up the narrow stairs, wide-eyed, stifling a giggle of shock as Arabella unlocked the door to her room and gestured for Grace to step inside.

The room, above a lively street of businesses and caf  s, was entirely Arabella’s own. It was no manor, certainly—it spoke very clearly to her station, a thousand miles below the ton. But it was, she knew, lovely. The ceilings were high, and the light by the window tipped past good and into enchanting. She kept it fairly bare, so that it would feel, more than anything else, like a painting studio. A pitcher of flowers by the narrow bed and a pile of cushions and books by the fireplace were enough to

make it her home.

“Oh, Arie,” Grace breathed, turning in a circle to take it all in. “You’ve made it very charming.” She went to a collection of in-progress canvases, leaned against the wall. “May I?”

“Of course.”

Grace peered closely at Arabella’s work. A smattering of still lifes, but most of the work was portraits. She stopped at a particular one. The subject was a noblewoman, though you’d never know from the pose, on the floor, leaning her back against an overstuffed and sagging shelf of dusty books, her feet crossed in front of her, a thick medical anatomy textbook in her lap. She gazed at the viewer with a sharply intelligent, not-unfriendly directness.

When Grace looked to Arabella, there were tears in her eyes. “My word. This is ... you’ve gotten so remarkable . I mean to say—you’ve always been brilliant. But when one hears about you ...”

“Talk of the scandalous lady painter leads the discussion,” Arabella finished, dryly. “You know, here, they don’t view me as particularly risqué. Oddly interesting for an Englishwoman, perhaps. But there is so much very bold work on display all the time, I’m rather middle of the pack.”

That was true, and not true. Arabella certainly wasn’t among the most famous painters in Paris—not even among the most famous females. But she’d done well for herself in a comparatively short time. She’d never had to utilize her fake letter of reference. And she’d never visited the duke’s solicitor.

She had kept Blackflint’s letter tucked in a sketchbook. When she’d found it again a few months ago, she’d studied it, taking in the clean, curt penmanship for a long

moment. Then decided it was time to throw it in the fire.

Monsieur Allard had insisted she stay in a room above his studio, rent-free, in exchange for tidying the place. As cleaning work went, it was rather adventurous, considering the types of disarray she found after a late-night class. She attended his lessons, also for free. “A condition of your employment,” he’d said.

Gratitude drove her to find more to do, and soon she was managing his unopened stack of mail, double-checking sums in his ledgers, helping to plan his upcoming exhibition.

An exhibition in which, only two days before the opening, he offered her a small space on the wall, in a back corner, not well-lit, not large enough for any of the canvases she’d been slaving over.

She stayed up all night with her oil pastels, working feverishly, then discarding a dozen fretful starts. She began to worry she could not make a worthy piece in time. Under the pressure, she felt utterly blocked.

Dawn was breaking when she looked out the window. And noticed it was beginning to rain.

She felt weightless, slightly between worlds, as she hurried down the stairs in her bare feet. The street was deserted. The air smelled like wet soot giving way to clean sky. It was cold, but she’d certainly survived much colder.

She stood for ten minutes, allowing the rain to drench her. Feeling it soak her clothing until it stuck to her skin. No one walked by. It was as if the city had arranged this, just for her.

Then she returned to her room, dripping, shivering. She angled her easel in front of

her mirror, and drew what she saw.

It earned her three sentences near the bottom of a review by the city's foremost art critic. It is a portrait like a peek through a keyhole into a secret chamber, though it is in no way vulgar. The subject is fully clothed, her eyes searching for something beyond the viewer. And yet one feels, even without further context, that one has trespassed upon a very private intimacy.

After that, the commissions began, and soon Arabella was making more than enough money to pay for classes, to let this room. She became known for her raw, unadorned style, her avoidance of the clichés of portraiture. It had become quite fashionable among the well-to-do to acquire an "unflattering" image of themselves.

Grace had finished looking at the paintings, and now sat dramatically at Arabella's little table.

"Well," she said. "It is obvious that you simply must paint me."

She posed Grace at the table, a shawl over one shoulder, chin resting in her hand. Arabella's goal was to capture her curious, eager-to-be-scandalized side, while also intimating that the young woman was deeply loyal and capable of keeping any secret. It was true—even after the scandal of Arabella's departure had exploded, Grace had not breathed a word about Arabella slipping away to Allard's classes. "She'd never shown herself the least bit capable of such subterfuge," was the refrain on every gossip-monger's lips, and Grace never once corrected them.

They settled into an easy rhythm of chatter as Arabella worked. Grace was considering several suitors, weighing their attributes, but slipping every third or fourth sentence into the romantic idealism she couldn't quite shake.

"Grace," Arabella said. "If you want love, marry for love." She saw the protest

brewing in her friend's eyes. "However modest their yearly might be, rest assured you'll never find yourself in a room as bare as this one unless you visit me again."

Grace took that in, sobered. "You're right."

"Well, you are right to worry about the future, it's only—"

"You were never happy. And now you are, completely. That is the entire lesson, isn't it?"

It wasn't quite so simple, of course. It had been well over a year—a year and a half, next week—and Arabella still thought of him each night as she doused the lamp. Or when she passed someone on the street, tall, broad-shouldered, all in black. A truly ridiculous abundance of such men in Paris lately—it seemed, as he had said, that God had a sense of humor.

She thought of him when she painted subjects with guarded eyes. Or silver at their temples.

She thought of him when it rained.

Grace saw something in Arabella's expression. "Arie," she said, cautiously. "I wonder ... The night you left. I know you and the duke conversed, and came to an understanding, and he arranged your departure."

"Yes."

"When ? You disappeared right after dinner. I think I was the only one to notice, until he did. Where did the conversation even happen?"

Arabella weighed her answer. She felt no shame when she thought of that night. But

she also didn't know what good it would do, to bring it all up again. "What are you asking, Grace?"

"Did he ..." her voice lowered to an embarrassed whisper. "Do something to you? Something untoward, or—not what you'd have wished, or—"

"Not at all." He did everything to me, but only because I asked. "I did run. He found me on the outskirts of his property. And when he understood my reasons, he let me go at once. I know rumors chase him everywhere, but he is not what we thought he was. I came away from the encounter quite convinced he would never harm me, or any woman."

Grace looked at her for a long moment. "Good."

It seemed the subject was at an end, mercifully. Arabella returned to her paints.

"Because I am given to understand he is newly betrothed. She and I are not acquainted. But, at any rate ... I worried."

Oh.

It wasn't sharp, the pain in her chest. There was something soft about the way it brushed over her heart. Like a thumb wiping something away.

Arabella kept her eyes on her work. "Well. No reason for concern. I am certain he will treat her with the utmost respect."

"Yes," Grace agreed. "But she's not who I was worried for."

The portrait didn't nearly capture Grace's insightfulness, Arabella realized at that moment.



She smiled, though she had no doubt Grace was unconvinced by it. “You have no cause to worry, I promise.”

Grace nodded, understanding in her eyes. And then, because she’d always been a very good friend, she did change the subject.

The burgeoning popularity of Arabella’s work earned her half the real estate on one wall of Allard’s next exhibition. Still the back wall, but Arabella recognized the progress. She chose the portrait of Grace, one of Allard, and one of her landlady, a birdlike woman of eighty years who still moved with the grace of a ballerina, and who, when the wine flowed, enjoyed telling bawdy stories of her youth among Eastern European aristocrats.

There was room for one more canvas, and she had one in mind. She considered it her best work.

But the idea that it might cause the wrong kind of talk kept her awake the night before the opening. Finally, she got out of bed, went to her easel, and decided to make another self-portrait. The paint was still wet when she finally delivered it to the gallery.

In the painting, she sat at her easel in profile, regarding a blank canvas. Back straight. Patient. The hand at her knee held a paintbrush dipped in dark paint. Her other hand rested upon the back of the chair. In a nod to the painting she would never publicly display, dangling from her thumb and forefinger was a length of black silk ribbon.

Thanks to Monsieur Allard’s scandalous newest series of nudes in positions that straddled the line between art and indecency, the opening of the exhibit was an exhausting whirl of patrons, artists, people speaking French too quickly, too many glasses of wine pressed into Arabella’s hands.

Finally, she retreated to the back of the space. Thankfully, her quiet portraits couldn't compete with the carnality of Allard's.

She regarded her self-portrait, and realized it hung crooked. She adjusted it, then stepped back to make sure it was straight, nearly running into the man who stood behind her, admiring the work.

"I like this one," he said in a thoughtful tone.

It could not be his voice. But it was his voice.

She turned.

He was dressed as usual. His hair had a bit more silver. Same black silk eyepatch. Same shoulders. Same impossible level of calm, while her pulse drummed riotously. The idea of speaking words back to him— him , standing, somehow, impossibly, right there —was so daunting as to seem ridiculous.

"May I ask if the artist mentioned the significance of the items in her subject's hands?" he asked, deep green gaze moving over her features, observing, to her dismay, every shift, every hitch, every second she flailed for a response that didn't drown her in mortification.

"She does not believe in explaining art," Arabella heard herself say from a great distance away.

"Ah." He turned to the portrait.

"It was a last-minute replacement," she mumbled. "By my understanding, the artist had another piece in mind, but worried it might be too revealing."

“More revealing than this one?”

“This is only a portrait of the artist at her easel. Part of a long tradition. Not one known for deep revelation.”

He threw her a dry look. “I am told the artist enjoys subverting tradition.”

When had he stepped closer? She caught the faintest whiff of his scent, the clean wool of his coat, citrus soap, leather. Him.

She took a step back. Met his eye, and saw that he knew exactly what had just happened.

A couple walked by, arm in arm. She was suddenly aware of the people all around them. She cleared her throat. “It is kind of you to visit the gallery, Your Grace. I was not aware you were a connoisseur of art.”

“I’m not.” There it was. The sardonic tone. But it was gone again when he continued. “I confess, I only happened to hear of the exhibition because I was in Paris with my fiancée, acquiring her wedding dress.”

Say something. Wish him well. Send him to the Devil. Say anything.

The best Arabella could do was smile, unconvincingly, stupidly.

He was doing what he did: watching her. It seemed cruel, considering. “Felicitations,” she finally managed. “I shall bid you good evening, and—”

“Called the wedding off, but I am confident she’ll look splendid in the gown, wherever she does decide to wear it. Is there somewhere more private we can speak, Bella?”

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The back room was shockingly quiet, after the buzz of the gallery. The space was crammed with dusty shelves bearing canvases, stretched or rolled and tied with twine. A wall of wood and gilt frames, tools, a desk overflowing with invoices.

Arabella led the duke through the warren of shelves. She had crammed her rejected piece in a corner, under a cloth.

She wanted to ask him a thousand questions so badly her jaw hurt. The issue was that as soon as she did, he'd start supplying answers. She could imagine many that would hurt. Especially since, completely ignoring her good sense, a tiny moth of hope had awoken inside her ribs.

She gestured to the covered canvas, propped on a dilapidated easel. "Here it is. Feel free."

He lifted the cloth, and saw that it was a portrait of him.

It was very much like the one she'd drawn that night—his visage against an indistinct, storm-gray background, head and shoulders, hair mussed, buttons of his wrinkled linen shirt open. Rendered in oil paint, rich with detail, nuance. Fully realized.

He stepped back, surprised. "When you said you worried it would cause problems, I imagined it was you, naked."

"Oh. No. I cannot imagine that would do much one way or another, at this stage of my storied existence."

He regarded the portrait more fully. She had worked on it slowly, over weeks. In part because it resisted her. She kept trying for the mix of emotions she'd seen in him when he sat for her that night in the cottage. But her brush instead kept rendering him amused, and intent, and fascinated. She knew it was impossible for a viewer to discern the story of the moment they were seeing, but it made her cheeks burn that the smile quirking up his lips was the very one he'd had at the moment he told her that he would give her what she wanted, but only if she begged.

By his face, though, it seemed very possible that Nick recognized it.

"It is my best work, I think. My favorite, at the least."

He was still gazing at it. "Then why not show it?"

"Because it would embarrass you. And your wife."

"Well. As I mentioned. No wife."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"Are you?"

"Regardless," she said, hating the quiver in her voice, "I would not wish to cause you further talk. You've been through quite enough of that."

He stepped closer. Too close. She started to move back—but couldn't, finding her back against the wall.

"Bella, Bella," he said softly. "There you go with the compassion. I thought you understood I am quite amused by the ridiculous things people say."

"Still—"

“And more than that, I thought you understood that I value the truth.” He nodded to the portrait. ““ Something happened between them. That wicked expression on his face. Bastard looks ridiculously besotted, ’” he said, mimicking the gossipy voices of the ton. He gave a short laugh. “They’d have gotten it right for once.”

She didn’t know what to say. Probably because so much of her mind was employed in surviving the nearness of his body. She was beginning to feel light-headed. “Your Grace—”

“ Nick . Say Nick. I made you scream that name. Extremely disappointing to hear you go backward after all that effort.”

He was going to touch her any minute. If he touched her, she would die, which posed a problem because if he did not touch her, she would die.

“Nick.”

“Yes. Better.”

“Why did you not wed?”

He did touch her then. One lock of gold curl, loose at the edge of her upswept hair. “I didn’t love her.”

“I thought that was the point.”

“So it was.” He smoothed the lock back into her chignon. “The urge to kiss you is strongly interfering with my ability to carry on this conversation.”

“You’ll need to be the one to step back. You have me pinned.”

His gaze flared at that, and she realized it had come out more provocatively than

she'd intended.

He took a step back. Exhaled, gathered himself. And continued the explanation. "I'd done a much better selection job this time. I could not have been less interested in her. I stood an excellent chance of succeeding in my plan to never love again. Pity I was already so deep in it with you that the entire exercise was a farce."

Arabella opened her mouth, but had no idea what to say. So she shut it.

He shook his head. "I'm not far enough away. I still want to ravish you."

He took another step back, and sighed. "Barely any better. At any rate, after you left, when I realized it was not going to pass, how I felt, I was worried. It was hell, to be precise about it. I was wretched without you, but if I went after you and you said yes, well, then I would have the woman I loved, and I'd doubtless only grow to love you more, and that seemed imperative to prevent, due to my worrisome history, et cetera." He shook his head, wry. "Exhausting bind you put me in, pet."

"I cannot apologize. You're the complicated one."

"Fair. It wasn't until I came here, with a fiancée who was not you, and I heard about this exhibition, that I realized ... " He hissed. "I can't stand this far away anymore. How would you feel about continuing, closer?"

"I'm not sure I would hear a word of it."

"I'll risk it." He closed the distance between them, pulled her close, and kissed her.

There was no preamble to it. In an instant, he had her full against his body, her lips parting under his, his tongue finding hers.

She felt a surge that was relief and hunger, pushed her fingers into his hair, grabbing

it by the fistful to pull him tighter. He pushed her against the wall, his body on hers. She wanted more. She wanted everything at once.

With difficulty, he broke the kiss, breathing hard. He leaned his forehead against hers. “Where was I?”

“Something about Paris, and realizing?” she asked, shaky.

“Yes. I realized ... that you are here. Here in Paris, but more fundamentally, you are here . Alive. Now. Living. Making beauty. Hearing music. Tasting sugar. And I am not with you for any of it.”

She felt her throat constrict. He kissed each of her eyelids. “And then there’s the crime of all that worship you’re missing. Don’t underestimate the discipline required not to get on my knees for you this instant.”

She laughed, though it came out halfway to a sob. “Tease.”

“Try this. We’ll have this conversation, and either way, we can end it with my tongue in your pretty cunt. If it’s to be goodbye, at least I can sweeten it.”

She pulled her head back to look at him, fighting the smile he’d put on her face—because what he was saying was serious. “Why goodbye? I thought just now—I thought I heard you say you love me.”

“Bella. I’ve no more interest in trapping you now than I did then. This ...” he gestured to the dusty room around them, the canvases, the distant sounds of the gallery. “It all suits you. You have what you wanted. You made the life you spoke of. I would take none of this world from you. And I would not push you into mine.”

The reality of it felt like very cold water.



“Of course,” she said, attempting to gather herself. She straightened her spine, moved her weight away from the wall. “It’s not realistic. You need a proper duchess. Not a walking scandal.”

He fixed her with a pointed look. “You say that as though one cannot be both. By all accounts I am Lucifer himself, yet I’m a proper enough duke.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it? Why?”

“Because you are a duke —”

“Why be one if I can’t even decide whom to make my duchess?” He raised a brow. “I would wed you today. This hour. I would have you for the rest of our lives. I’d happily spend half the year in this city if it’s where you wish to be, despite my hopeless French, and there is not a room in England I would not be pleased to enter with you on my arm. Paint what you want. Exhibit what you want. Send a galleon ship of nude portraits to St. James Palace. I would have you as you are, Arabella. Precisely. You’re an empress, ridiculous to think you could not easily be a mere duchess.”

She’d stopped breathing. She forced herself to inhale.

His expression turned sober. “You are the only person who causes me to get carried away . I didn’t intend to turn that into a proposal.”

“Of course not,” she said quickly.

He slanted her a look. “Don’t be so quick to dismiss. Of all the things I want to do to you, proposing stands at the very head of the queue.”

“Then why—”

“Because I haven’t figured out how to sell it to you yet. I am not ideal. I’m a sometime melancholic with one eye and darkness in his soul, at least according to a woman who’d bedded me only moments earlier. I’m stronger and wiser than I was at twenty-six, certainly, and I did consider it—telling you that what I said that night isn’t true anymore. That I don’t fear myself in the least. That everything will always be well, forever.”

She laughed sharply at that. “I don’t think I’m the audience for it.”

“Well, exactly. You wouldn’t want the easy lie. That is how you ended up here in the first place, painting the truth.” He ran a hand through his hair, at a loss. “So I do not know what to say to you.”

She touched his cheek. Where smooth skin met scar. Then let her hand drop. “Say what you know.”

She watched him consider the question. A long moment spun out. Through the wall, the muffled sound of roaring laughter from the gallery. Then, quiet.

He took her hand. Ran his thumbs along the knuckles, turned it palm up, and pressed a kiss into the center. “I know that being apart from you seems a deeply flawed solution. I know that not giving you my heart is a mistake. I know that I want to wake up beside you as many times as I can. That’s the whole of it.”

He waited for her to respond. When he couldn’t read her expression, he added, wry, “And if marriage strikes you as too conventional, I am certain we can come up with something more modern.”

She touched his cheek again. This time, she held it. “I miss you most when it rains.”

His gaze softened. "I do hope you miss me from inside a warm, dry room."

"Not always. But I'm less interested in wandering about in a storm if it doesn't lead in fairly short order to you cutting the clothes from my body."

"No need to catch a chill. Ask and I'll do it right now."

She let herself lean against his body. Let herself feel him breathe, for a moment, her eyes closed. "Half the year here?"

"Here, Greece, the moon."

"You would really . . . as I am?"

"Bella. As you are, precisely. The first time we walk into a room together, the entire ton will perish where they stand from the sheer cheek of us. And that means I'll enjoy attending a ball for the first time in my life." He nuzzled her cheek. "I think, all frivolities aside ... we make a pair, Arabella. A good one. A strong one."

She could see it too. She took his hands. And said words she'd spoken to him once before. But this time, she meant them. "I would be honored to be your wife."

His cheeks flushed. He held her gaze, very clear, full of feeling.

"But you will need to do one thing for me first," she said. Leaning back against the wall. Regarding him with an imperious smile.

He raised an eyebrow. "Anything."

"Beg me."

The duke grinned. "With pleasure."