



*A Mistress
by Design*

Sabrina Darby

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*L*he soprano was sharp. After nearly a quarter hour of hearing the woman screech her way through her aria, Sarah slipped past the red velvet hangings of Lord Penwick's box and into the relative quiet of the corridor. She had only moments before the lobby filled with patrons during intermission. Moments would be enough to commandeer a more potent drink than the champagne Penwick had in his box.

The lobby, naturally, was not deserted. Others with the same idea gathered at the bar and kept the waitstaff busy. She saw a few men she knew, ladies she knew of, and the least appealing of her three suitors.

Then she saw him. Tall, broad, dark, and standing with legs apart in a slightly indelicate manner, as if he meant to keep the ground steady beneath him. She could find no fault with the cut of his coat, of his breeches, or of the rubies that winked from his cravat. He looked like a man, not just a lord. He reminded her of the men she had seen growing up, their shirts off as they worked in the sun—brawny and fit; he was a man who would make her feel as if he was consuming her simply by covering her with his body. A man who by the sheer size of him would make her feel protected.

She wanted him.

He was alone, his companion of a moment earlier having wandered away, somewhere. Sarah drifted forward, pulled by this ineffable something before she realized that even for a courtesan, some things simply weren't done.

He tossed back the rest of his drink and as his hand lowered, his gaze caught hers.

In that one instant, she knew she had to decide how to approach him. Was he a man who preferred innocence, coyness, or seduction? Did he like a bold woman or a furtive one? If she didn't avert her eyes soon, she would be bold by default, almost as bold as if she had continued to move forward, had introduced herself here in the lobby of the theater when he might be anyone, had never been vetted.

The doors to the pit opened and the flood of humanity tumbled out. For a few moments more, she saw him above the sea of others. Then he was obscured. Try as she might, she saw neither head nor tail of him and searched futilely in the crowd until, seeing her unwanted would-be suitor, Lord Phillip Woolsey, she fled back to the box where her friend Maria and

Maria's protector awaited. As the audience settled back for the next act, she spotted the unknown man again, in the pit, amongst a mixed company of men and women.

"Do you know him?" she asked Penwick, gesturing with her opera glasses.

Penwick peered down, squinting. But in the end it was Maria who answered.

"That's Lord Harrison. He only arrived back in England last week. You'd better snatch him up if you want him, Sarah. He'll hardly be unattached for long."

"You mercenary women," Penwick said with a laugh. "Snatch him up indeed. Harrison hasn't had a mistress for as long as I've known him. Married this last decade or so. And don't you know, Miss Leighton? Men don't like to be snatched."

At the age of seven, when most little girls her age dreamed of being a princess, Sarah knew that this was a ridiculous fantasy. There were very few princesses and one either had to be born into the position or marry into it. Neither of which circumstance was very likely. Like most little girls she loved dresses, intricately styled hair, fine white horses, tall beds that made her feel as if she were floating, and all the *trappings* of a princess. But there was only one way that the third daughter of a dairy farmer would ever resemble anything like royalty. She had to become a courtesan.

It was with the same single-minded surety that Sarah on this particular morning languidly slid to the ground from her tall bed, encased her feet into warm slippers and padded across the hardwood floor to the large, oval looking-glass. She was nude other than the slippers and that nudity was exactly what she needed to see. She needed to take stock.

The flawless glass—gifted to her by one of her lovers as she had learned never to pay for anything she could beg for with a kiss—reflected back a sight with which she was very familiar. Some men preferred their mistresses to be girlish and thin, fresh at sixteen and seventeen, not even the slightly more mature eighteen of a lady's first season. But at twenty-four, Sarah was a woman and her body reflected that. Breasts with their pale nipples, erect in the winter chill, still kept their firm, plump shape. The rest of her too was rounded in all the right ways, generous enough in the hips for a man's passionate grip, but not so much that the straight neoclassical fashions didn't fall perfectly on her frame.

She would be presenting Lord Harrison a woman grown, and in a rare, brief, religious moment, she prayed that was what he desired. She slipped into her warm dressing gown and strode back across the room to yank on the bed pull. She heard only the thud of thickly corded rope as it swung against the carved mahogany bedpost, but down below, the bells would jangle and her maid would hurry to answer her call.

Although Sarah knew very well that many men admired her, her career as a courtesan had not been as successful as she would like. She had been about this work for six years, after all. The most celebrated of her class awoke each morning to the sound of poets proclaiming their beauty and the gossip sheets printing fresh gibberish. If Sarah were celebrated, as the best were, the sudden death of her protector last month would have caused a bidding war over her favors.

Instead, the offers she had received were hardly dignifiable. Thankfully, she could afford to wait. If she were willing to live a retiring sort of life, she could wait forever.

Only, last night at the theater, she had seen Lord Harrison. Sarah had not become a courtesan because she was consumed by physical desires. However, she wanted this man in the most visceral way possible. In a way that made her shift uncomfortably in her chair in Lord Penwick's box during the next act each time she spied Lord Harrison with her opera glasses. She had tried to find him at the end of the evening but it was impossible in the crush.

After that night Sarah had made it her mission to study him, his likes and dislikes, the likelihood of him being a generous protector. She had done so discreetly of course, as it would never do for him to feel that she were stalking him. Men liked to be the ones in pursuit. The sort of man who desired a woman to pursue him was not the sort of man *she* desired.


Orville, Lord Harrison did not seem that sort of man. For one thing, he was past the first flush of youth. At thirty-six, he was a widower with five children—Penwick's information had been out of date—three of whom were legitimate. The two illegitimate children had been born prior to his marriage as a result of his liaison with Kate Marvin, an opera dancer who, in some cloaked scandal, had fled England for Italy and there met an untimely death. The fact that his illegitimate children were cared for in his own home, that his late wife had willingly cared for them as well, said much either about the generosity of them both or the strength of Lord Harrison's will. Through the wonderful and oftentimes reliable channel of servants' gossip, Sarah learned that he was recently returned from South America, where he had been doing the work of the British government. From the less reliable conduit of courtesans' chatter, she learned that he still grieved for his wife and had been faithful to her and her memory these past twelve years.

"Miss Leighton?"

Sarah blinked. Focused. Anne stood before her, awaiting orders. Anticipating Sarah's needs, the maid had already placed a fresh bowl of steaming water and two folded towels behind her on the cabinet.

"Your riding habit, Miss?"

It was Tuesday after all, but Sarah could hardly stay true to her usual schedule when there were far more pressing matters to take care of. It had required a bit of effort, but she had obtained a copy of Lord Harrison's agenda for the week. She knew that just as she was doing today, a man could always change his mind, but she very much doubted he would be canceling a visit to his mother.

 ith satisfaction, Harrison noticed that his mother's door opened before he even reached the top of the steps. It was a pleasure to be back in England, to return to a land of innate civilization. As beautiful as Venezuela had been to an artist's eye, for a gentleman it was a land of singular discomfort. The very ants *bit*.

Despite the fact that he knew this townhouse inside and out, and had spent much of his childhood playing and hiding in its spaces, he followed the footman to his mother's sitting room

and waited to be announced.

“There you are, Orville!” his mother cried, and he winced at the sound of his name. It wasn’t a proper sort of name for a man at all, and was even worse after that female novelist, Frances Burney, had named the hero of her book, Lord Orville. He much preferred, no, *demanding* that his acquaintances call him Harrison. Harry at the very least.

“Am I truly?” he questioned with an involuntary arch of his left eyebrow. He had struggled for years to quell the habit but it was the one vice he still retained.

“Don’t be flippant.” She waved him toward the chair on her left and then rang the bell for fresh tea. “How are the children?”

“They are well. I was thinking of bringing the eldest ones down to London. Katherine’s birthday is next week.”

“You know I’m leaving for Bath,” Lady Harrison complained with a sigh. “London in December is horrid. All of society gone. I am only here for you and your exhibition, dear boy.”


He did know that if it were one of his other daughter’s birthdays, his mother would gladly prolong her stay another week. However, she had never warmed to his bastards. Nor would society when the time came to send them out into the world. It was the way things were, and he had no disagreement. Only, the sin had been his not that of his children, and thus he intended to do the best by them that he could.

Adelia had been wonderful. He had chosen his late wife well. She had even been so agreeable as to die while he was in Venezuela, a long illness after bearing their second son, and leave him with the freedom to follow his own inclinations. She had been a sweet woman, fine in bed, but not one who had inspired his fantasies.

Harrison had a great many fantasies.

And as much as he admired the very civilized and proper accoutrements of society, he wanted something far more primal in the bedroom. That sense of desire for something new and something different had propelled him to offer his services to the crown and to travel to a distant clime. Before Venezuela, his mistress Kate had been everything a young man could want in a woman and then Adelia had been everything a man could want in a wife. Now he wanted something else.

But Harrison had the strange sensation, almost a void within, which whispered to him in the dark of the night or whenever he was far from his canvas and paints. There was something more. Something more to him even and he had felt this way ever since that night in Venezuela when he had breathed in the intoxicating snuff-like powder the natives called yopo.

 Elsbeth lay on the cushioned seat, heavy lids mostly closed but for one that remained slightly cracked. Sarah met that wary gaze with her own. She had seen the dog do tricks for its owner—Maria was extraordinarily proud of her pet—but would this sleepy, aged girl do anything for someone not her master?

She had better. Sarah’s plans were utterly dependent on Elsbeth’s cooperation. It had been-

hard enough finding a reason to loiter in such a completely respectable neighborhood as where Lady Harrison lived.

“Miss Leighton,” her footman Jarvis whispered into the open window of the coach. “The front door just opened.”

“I fully expect you to catch the dog after I trip, you understand? Maria will never forgive me if harm comes to Elsbeth.”

“Understood, miss.” He opened the carriage door.

“Let’s go Elsie,” Sarah urged, prodding the dog.

Suddenly, as if she hadn’t been slumbering a moment earlier, Elsie clambered down to the floor and Sarah quickly remembered to grab the lead. She couldn’t let go this soon; the dog needed some directions. But the beast had decided “Let’s go” meant let’s run, and Sarah found herself tripping indelicately out of the carriage, struggling to keep up. When she finally did let go of Elsbeth’s leash, it was to see the dog do almost exactly what Sarah wished—careen into Lord Harrison, capturing his attention. The lead tangled with the man’s legs for a moment, slowing Elsbeth down.

“Oh please! Stop her,” Sarah cried. Lord Harrison shifted, seemed as though he wasn’t going to help, but then she saw that Elsbeth had stopped, was straining against the lead, and that the lead was firmly beneath Harrison’s heel. He bent down, retrieved the long braided strip of leather and then slowly turned.

Just in time Sarah remembered to favor her left leg, to gasp audibly over her injured limb. Standing up, she finally dared to look at Lord Harrison. She took a hesitant step, grimaced and then reached for the nearest banister. He was by her side in an instant.

“This fiend is yours?” he asked, gesturing to the dog. Elsbeth stared at them both and then finally lay down on the ground at their feet, as if she would fall asleep again right there.

“Thank you so much for stopping her. I don’t know what I would have done.”

“What you clearly have done is injure yourself in your pursuit. And I see why!” he exclaimed, the forcefulness of his deep voice sending pleasurable shivers down her spine. “How ever could you run in those ridiculous shoes?”

Her footman reached her side, and she gestured with her hand. “Elsbeth.” Jarvis accepted the lead from Lord Harrison.

“I’m sorry, miss,” Jarvis said. “I wasn’t fast enough.”

“That’s quite all right. I think however I might put off the rest of my errands.” She aimed a smile full of gratitude at Lord Harrison. “Thank you again, for your help.” She started to walk, forced her leg to buckle beneath her as if the weight were too much.

“You can hardly walk.”

“My carriage is just around the corner.”

“Please allow me to escort you,” he said in the moment before he swept her up off her feet. She had to repress the desire to sigh and snuggle back into his strong arms. Her plan was proceeding better than she had even expected.

“There is no need, sir. Jarvis can tell my driver to bring the carriage around.”

But they were already walking and over his shoulder, she could see Jarvis leading Elsbeth

just a few steps behind.

“I am impressed,” she said shakily, forcing the words out over feigned pain. “I know I’m hardly a feather.”

“No gentleman would make a lady walk on an injured limb.”

“But then I am hardly a lady.” She felt his grip shift at her words and she hoped he wouldn’t drop her out of shock. “And most London gentlemen have not your strength.”

He made a small noise, as if that noncommittal sound should be response enough, and she understood his cowardice. He had not until that moment suspected she might be anything other than a gently bred female. Her clothing was of the most current fashion, was hardly attention begetting in any way other than tasteful attractiveness.

“Indecent, I know, to admit, sir, but I wouldn’t wish to mislead you in any way. Your chivalry has aided a woman in trade.” She peeked up at him, saw the twitch of his jaw, and knew he understood. But other than that slight shifting of muscle, neither his grip nor his behavior shifted.

They reached her carriage where her driver was waiting, face impassive. Harrison let her down, slowly, making certain she had her balance on the unhurt limb before he released her.

“You have my complete gratitude, Mr...” she let her voice trail off, waiting for him to fill in the space.

“Lord Harrison.”

“Sarah Leighton, my lord. And I can honestly say that the pleasure of making your acquaintance far exceeds the pain of my injury.”

He laughed, uncomfortably it seemed, and she realized with a sinking sensation that he was not immediately charmed. He had not been hooked. And yet she, after having spent several minutes in the grip of his strong arms, was all the more affected.

She hesitated in the open doorway of the carriage, her supposedly injured foot upon the step, her ankle and the lace of her petticoat indelicately revealed, which she hoped he noticed. Assuming the most serious expression of gratitude she could muster, she slanted a glance at him.

“May I convey you anywhere, Lord Harrison? It will be dark soon and it is a terribly cold day to be walking.”

He looked over his shoulder in the direction of his mother’s house. Sarah wondered if his mother had seen any of the whole charade, had pondered who the woman was that her son had swept up in his arms, had gasped and hoped the neighbors weren’t watching.

*H*arrison studied the courtesan before him. He knew very well that the invitation into her carriage intended a ride of a different sort. Yet it was too convenient—that he would be thinking of intercourse and then here was a woman, all but offering herself to him on his mother’s doorstep. And this Sarah Leighton—she was pretty enough, clinging, and yet there was something, something awfully indelicate about her. Grasping perhaps. Or demanding? He wasn’t certain. Yet his instincts told him that if he took her to bed, it wouldn’t be the sensuous, womanly embrace he craved. Her manipulative facade of fragility angered him, as

if she were mocking everything he had admired in his wife, in the previous women with whom he had been. As if she were mocking *him*.

“Yes, if it isn’t out of your way. You may put me down in Grosvenor.”

She smiled, those pale blue eyes triumphant before the lashes lowered, before her chin ducked away and she turned into the carriage. Her backside rounded into his view, cloaked in swaths of fabric but nonetheless there. Despite his intellectual dislike of her, of her ways, his body responded to the suggestion.

He climbed in after her. The thin light of the evening dimmed further inside the coach, which smelled of damp and dog. Then the four-legged offender herself, now safely back on her lead, was transferred from footman to Sarah Leighton’s lap. The courtesan didn’t look particularly happy about the burden and quickly relocated the animal to the seat beside her.

“She isn’t mine,” Miss Leighton said, as if she could read his thoughts. “I was doing a favor for a friend. It would have been terrible if I had lost Elsbeth.”

“The dog is named Elsbeth?” He pressed his lips together, frustrated that he had even put forth the question.

“Yes, a ridiculous name, I know,” she said with a laugh. “Tell me, Lord Harrison, why I haven’t seen you around London? Are you the retiring sort, who sticks to his country house and horses?”

There it was, that challenging way of hers, as if she couldn’t help herself. He was pleased he could read people so well. Of course, it was one of the skills that had made him so useful to the Crown.

“I am recently returned to England from the Americas,” he answered.

“How adventurous you are, to travel in war time.”

“I was acting as a political advisor. Adventure had little to do with it.”

She smiled knowingly, he thought, before the expression was tempered with a questioning one. She had a funny little mouth. So quick to move, to quirk in interesting ways.

“What was it like? I’ve heard the continent is all jungle, wild animals and terrible insects.”

“Beautiful, Miss Leighton, above all. The land is lush and untamed. The further inland one gets, the further from the thin attempt at civilization, the more stunning the landscape appears.”

“And what of the people?”

“What of them?” Harrison scoffed. The image of the rich, dark greens of oversized leaves and the moist shadow of towering trees was heavy in his mind. “They are as human as any other, as violent, as civilized. They eat, sleep, fuck...”

He raised an eyebrow, daring her.

She looked down at her lap, her lashes dark against her pale skin.

“I think you have taken a dislike to me, my lord,” she said softly. “I hardly meant to inconvenience you. I offered a ride only to make amends for taking up so much of your time.”

The statement was calculated to make him feel like the veriest bastard, as if any woman, or man for that matter, could make him feel that way. He knew well enough that her wounded

demeanor was feigned. How did she think to seduce a man this way? It was amusing though, as much as it angered him. And her attempts were useless as well. Only last night, in the company of friends he hadn't seen in ages, he had met Carlotta Bruni, the famed courtesan who had just left her protector in a pique of glorious female rage, whose full lips and languid charm intoxicated anyone who looked upon her.

He neither needed nor wanted Sarah Leighton.

*S*he let him down in Grosvenor Square, completely aware that she had made a poor impression. An unfortunate situation because despite and perhaps even in part due to his brutish behavior, she found herself more attracted to him than before. He was clearly a man of adventure, who knew what he wanted and took it. She admired that, felt drawn to it as if she had met a kindred soul. Ridiculous, laughable, and yet, she couldn't explain why she felt the need to pursue a man who clearly did not want her. Perhaps a more earthly reason for her interest was that a quarter of an hour staring at those strong thighs, revealed by the parting of his heavy coat, had made her flushed with desire. She had heard women talk about that girlish rush of longing but she herself had never had such an infatuation. Now she did.

*H*arrison began the day at his club astonished, as he had been every day for the last month, at how little it contrasted in tone from the gentlemen's homes in South America. The architecture, naturally, was different and everyone here was so very English, not a whisper of Spanish or Portuguese to be heard, but still. Men lounged, drank, smoked, talked of war and other subjects of both consequence and unimportance. The older men, he knew, but the younger, the new generation who had been given their father's or uncle's support to join, were for the great part unknown to him. Yet, apparently, he was not unknown to them.

They drank to him, celebrated him, not only for his long ago role at Trafalgar, but for his journeys since, for the exhibition of his artwork that had opened two nights before. Above all, they admired his courtship of the beautiful Carlotta Bruni, with no doubt at his ability to seduce her into his bed. Every one of these young whelps wanted her, had made their feeble attempts at flirtation. But the only serious contest anyone held for Harrison was the Marquess of Anderberry, a man his own age.

"Sarah Leighton? What do you know of her?" He found himself questioning the young Corinthian who lounged in the deep leather chair to his left. He wished he could take it back. No statement was made lightly these days, not with the gossip columns listing nearly his every move.

The boy shrugged. "I don't know. Who is she?"

"A courtesan."

"Oh, Sarah!" This from the dandy with his neck points so high he looked as though he might poke an eye out. "I know her, but the question is," the man drawled with a simpering laugh "how do you? And what of La Bruni?"

"Is that the question, Randolph?" Harrison returned, not bothering to hide the irritation in his voice. One kept a reputation and the respect of others by careful diligence, and Harrison would not suffer this fool's mirth.

"She was Valery's mistress until he died, oh when was that? Six weeks ago, I believe."

Valery. A vague recollection of the earl, of sandy hair, a purple embroidered waistcoat, another time yelling in the House of Lords. What had Miss Leighton been like with him? Pushy, domineering? Manipulative? Had Valery left her well off or was she now angling desperately for a protector?

"I didn't hear that he had died," Harrison said mildly.

"Apoplexy," Randolph continued as if Harrison's earlier admonishment had knocked all of his affectations out of his mannerisms and speech. Apparently there was a man still beneath that mess. "In any event, she's a bit of a wit, an amusing dinner partner, but certainly no beauty. This is the first I've heard of her since his death."

Yet she hadn't been wholly retiring. Much later the night before, after the nagging thought had finally materialized into something he understood, Harrison had remembered where he had seen Sarah Leighton before: she had been in the lobby of the theater a week earlier.

There was a silence, as if Randolph and the Corinthian were both waiting for Harrison to reveal why he had asked of the woman.

"She was at the theater," he said finally, setting his glass down upon the table beside him. Then he placed his hands firmly on the arms of the chair. "I'd best be off. Good afternoon."

From the club, he went straight to the jewelers. He knew very well that men of the ton gossiped worse than fishwives and after that debacle, he needed to allay any rumors. Carlotta Bruni might hear of this simple inquiry and in a pique reject his advances.

He browsed the selection, contemplated ordering a necklace specially designed to match Carlotta's eyes. Then the sparkling of emeralds caught his attention. He gestured to the clerk to take them out of the glass display. It was a bracelet, fine and intricately worked. He knew she would admire it, favor him with that languid smile, that heavy lidded gaze.

"Lord Harrison!" He turned at the female voice. He found Miss Leighton, the courtesan with the injured ankle, standing before him. She looked much the way she had the day before, glossy and dark-eyed. Tension gathered in his jaw. To meet a stranger twice in two days in a town as large as London was coincidence indeed. He didn't put much stock in coincidence.

"What a surprise!" Sarah said with a light laugh. "Are you following me, Lord Harrison?"

He raised his eyebrow and she looked away. He heard her sigh, found her attention seemingly riveted on the table, on the bracelet he held in his hands.

"A gift for a lady?"

"Yes." He saw no need to dissemble, wondered even if he should mention the lady by name.

"This lady is very lucky."

"I think I would be the fortunate one if she accepts my attentions," Harrison said.

"Your attentions."

Sarah let her words end on a sigh, as if she were imagining those very attentions, which in truth, as she stared at the small strip of tanned skin that showed between his glove and his sleeve, she was envisioning. She knew his forearms would be corded muscle covered by just the right smattering of hair. Who was the fortunate woman that would receive the bracelet, receive his touch?

“Carlotta Bruni, of course,” she said lightly, knowing she was admitting that she listened to gossip, that she was aware of him more than simply a man she had met by chance the day before. “She is, without a doubt, lovely.” She slanted a glance up at him. “I confess I am jealous.”

He laughed, the corners of his eyes creasing appealingly.

“Wrap this up, will you?” he said to the clerk, laying the bracelet back down on its velvet cloth. Then he leaned on the counter, gave her his full attention. Sarah thought the store ridiculously warm. “How is your limb, Miss Leighton?”

“Much better, my lord!” she said, perhaps a bit too vehemently. “Thanks to your chivalry.”

“And what brings you to Abrams and Grahams?”

You, she almost said. Surely it was written all over her face anyway. She was a complete disaster around him, unraveling faster than she could think.

“A repair,” she said quickly, shaking her reticule a bit to indicate that the jewelry was within.

“Ah, an injury after all.”

The clerk returned then with a neatly wrapped package tied with a ribbon.

“Good day to you, Miss Leighton.”

She watched Lord Harrison leave, unable to think of a single thing she could do or say to make him stay.



he couldn't get him out of her mind.

The gallery was in a tiny, poorly lit space. She found herself there on the arm of Lord Phillip, the suitor she had tried to avoid the night of the theater. He was pleased she had asked him to squire her to the display, seemingly unaware that it was his friendship with the owner of the gallery that necessitated the arrangement. He paid the shilling entrance fee, and then she held the catalogue, a printed sheet listing the titles of the pieces. The room was terribly crowded with persons of the first fashions, and while Lord Phillip bowed his head and acknowledged any number of people, her own acquaintances were few. She felt as if she floated through the space, between the hard press of bodies, invisible.

Lord Harrison, however, with his heroic background and these vibrant landscapes of a place called Venezuela, a place that was, like so much of the world, in the middle of war, would never be invisible. And with good reason. The established artists and critics might be calling Harrison a noble upstart, a spectacle and not a maestro, but Sarah disagreed. At the sight of his paintings, that girlish infatuation seemed to seep through her whole body, make the yearning more intense. She wanted to capture all the beauty that he saw, all the strange vibrant movement in

these paintings, where a tree looked as if it could be imbued with human emotions. How strange and wonderful all at once! It made her think of that first moment she had seen Lord Harrison, legs spread, taming the ground of the theater lobby beneath his feet. Surely he approached everything in life the same way, mastering it as much as he had mastered the sea. Her face felt hot, her blood feverish. She knew very well that he was with Carlotta Bruni this very night. Likely that bracelet now graced her wrist and her kisses, the tender skin of his neck. But one night was not a contract born, and if she knew Carlotta, the woman would hold out as long as possible, play Harrison against another man, assure the best negotiation she could.

And Sarah was not above stealing a man away while there was still a chance. Perhaps Carlotta was stunning and exotic and her eyebrows and toes were perfect as well. Perhaps those emeralds on that bracelet did match her flashing eyes perfectly, and her laughter flowed like honey, warm and melting upon a man's skin. Perhaps Sarah was nothing but a little wren compared to her, but this time, this time Sarah would not fail. Not when her desire was strong, her understanding of this man so powerful. His every movement expressed his essence and his paintings underscored everything she felt she knew.

Penwick might have said that a man didn't like to be snatched, but sometimes he had to be for his own good. She had to try again.

The next morning she called on Lord Harrison at his Grosvenor Square home, gave her card to the unsuspecting butler.

She waited in the sitting room for a scant few minutes before the butler led her through the house, toward the back and into the garden, and then into a small sunlit conservatory, warm despite the cold winter day. There were paintings everywhere, stacked against the glass walls, covered in cloths. Clearly this was Lord Harrison's studio.

Then she saw him, walking towards her, his shirtsleeves rolled up, the cloth at his neck gaping and revealing the tanned skin a cravat would have hidden. She wanted to lick that skin desperately, and that desire stunned her.

"What are you doing here?" His eyes narrowed. She felt his masculinity as a visceral force in the room.

"I would never have come to your home if it were not your studio as well."

"My studio. Everything that is for public display is currently at the gallery. But then, you aren't really here for that."

The air grew sharp and thick around them. She felt the urgency of it, the extreme sense of being aware of the moment. Finally, not only was she aware of him, but he was aware of her.

"Am I not?" she challenged, swaying towards him, wanting the move to be sensuous.

"No. You're here because you would prefer I gifted that emerald bracelet to you." She hadn't forgotten the brilliance of those emeralds but they had paled beside the golden tint of his skin, which had beckoned to her tongue, her teeth, her lips.

"And you, you are chasing after the wrong woman. You think you want Carlotta. You think that because everyone else wants her and what is desired by all is the most precious."

"What I want—"

"I know what you want. I've made a study of you, my lord. And don't look so shocked, so aggrieved. Perhaps I should have waited, have let you notice me. But there aren't any odes to my eyelashes, and there is not one single portrait of me yet painted."

He looked surprised and that pleased her. Perhaps it was, after all, the time for candor.

"You want a woman who is skilled, who knows what she is about. Who you never need to apologize to for your desires. You want a woman who will accept the basest part of you and love you for it."

"Love?" he scoffed and she held up a hand.

"That is what *you* want, my lord. And what *I* want is for you to paint me."

"I only paint landscapes."

"My body is a landscape, shall I show you the topiaries?"

"By God, you are bold." But he took a step forward instead of back and that move encouraged her.

"And you don't like bold?"

His eyes narrowed.

"Undress." She inhaled sharply. It was as if his very command had begun the process and she could feel the fine muslin of her chemise, the worked lace of her petticoat, the silk of her dress, all slipping from her body, caressing her flesh in their inevitable path down to the floor.

"Why?"

His shifted, spread his legs and found his balance. She admired his thighs.

"I'm an artist, I must be inspired by my work. I can't paint you if I don't find you inspiring."

To inspire him inspired her and she heard again that whisper of fabric urging her on. But she couldn't simply obey him. He was neither her lover nor her protector. If anything, he belonged to another woman, to Carlotta.

"Do you find Carlotta inspiring? Or do you find the twenty-odd images of her that hang in Farthing's Gallery to be what stimulates you? That is Carlotta filtered through *his* mind. Perhaps it is Farthing's imagination that excites you."

He reached for her. She let him, anticipated it with a capacious hunger. His hand curled around her shoulder, covering both cloth and flesh but where skin touched skin, she savored him.

"Undress."

She did, slowly. Willing him to meet her eyes, forcing him to, as every garment fell to the floor. He was watching her, his eyes dark and unfathomable.

When she stood naked before him, aware of the slight draft in the room, she finally wondered at what she was doing. Why was she here, fighting for him to want her? It was as if all these years of wanting so much—of being not even second best despite giving up her soul for riches, for material goods—would eat her alive. She needed to win. She wanted to be celebrated.

"Yes, I'll paint you."

He wondered at himself. At the sudden alacrity with which he agreed to capture her likeness on canvas. It wasn't her naked body that had done it, though his own had responded quite readily to the visual stimulation. No, it was the sudden vulnerability, the uncertainty that seemed to grip her as she stood there, naked and shivering before him. Suddenly he understood why men painted human subjects when before he had found the art tiresome, painstaking. There was a push and pull, a contrast of needs in people and it was especially marked in Sarah. She pushed and pushed, made no bones about wanting him, wanting him as her protector, so much so that she would strip here in front of him. But then she showed a frailty, and—

He handed her back her chemise. It was a frilly, frivolous thing, unlike anything his wife had owned. It revealed and suggested far more than it obscured.

Mercurial—it seemed the best word to describe this woman who stood before him, her expressions shifting so fast that his breath caught in his throat. He directed her further into the conservatory, to a wide daybed littered with books, periodicals and sketches. He swept these to the ground, positioned her in their place, and it seemed to take forever, every touch a caress, every glance heated, scorching. Then, when he had her draped across the divan the way he wanted, her neck arched back, her hair streaming behind her over the arm of the sofa, she shifted ever so slightly. Looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

He nearly dropped his paintbrush. He almost fell to his knees. Instead, he found himself by her side, stroked the skin of her neck with his hand, cupped the back of her head with the other.

He wanted to kiss her but the air was so thick and full, and he thought perhaps the spell would break, the charm of inspiration. So with a mere inch between their lips, he let go, backed away and stood.

"You look perfect right there," he said softly. "Don't move."

She didn't stir as he backed away, pulled a fresh canvas upon his easel. And as he sketched an outline, the only movement was the rise and fall of her breasts with her breath. The motion itself was musical and he was confused for a moment, trapped between art forms, all of his senses bombarded.

But he persevered, committing her to memory, the pale skin, pale nipples, dark hollows, rounded convexities of flesh, delicate places where bone created sharper angles. He had always been a master of reading people but he had never appreciated their depth or the art of the discipline. Her very body said it all, the power play between submission and dominance, the essence of the female. He wondered if his wife, Carlotta, his other lovers, would have been as interesting to his eye if he had seen them through this new perspective.

"I'm thirsty." The words pierced his thoughts but he didn't know if she had spoken them before, repeated them now.

"Would you like wine?" he asked, and heard his voice sound thickly.

"Wine will do."

He put down his brush, moved to the side table where a decanter stood. He poured the

carnet liquid into the same glass he had used before her arrival and brought it to her.

She started to move, but he stopped her.

“Just your head or you’ll disturb the line,” he said softly, and when she had lifted her head, let him support it with his hand, he brought the glass to her lips.

He watched her drink, a small parting of the lips to let the liquid pass. He studied the working of her throat. He moved the glass away, not asking if she wanted more. His own thirst was raging.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he said just a moment before he did.

*H*is lips touched hers, his head blocked the sunlight, and soon she was lost in not only the pressure of his mouth on hers, but the heat of his body so near, the overwhelming maleness that surrounded her. And she realized anew that the air was fragrant with flowers—and with him.

He was kissing her, possessing her with his mouth and all at once she felt it, loved it, savored it, and thought about how he was finally doing exactly what she wanted. His hands were on her skin; one moved to cup a breast. The embrace cradled her, held her safe, but she knew it would move. Perhaps she would stay there, pursue this desire that propelled her forward in a way no other passion had, but what would she gain other than his flesh over hers, his heat inside of her?

She twisted her face toward cool air and then his mouth was there again, waiting for her. She turned again, and his lips found the line of her jaw, and that touch stopped the speech she had parted her own lips to begin.

“My lord,” she gasped finally, arching her neck back to escape him. “We should stop, Lord Harrison.”

He stilled briefly over her, his mouth so close to her skin that his breath scorched her. “I thought this was what you wanted.”

“I thought so too.” Her own words shocked her and then they were said. He was moving away, understanding the meaning, the hesitation. She wanted to take the words back, to grab his head and urge it back to her body. What was she doing? What had she done? Ruining everything she had worked for.

In the space he’d left, she moved, lifted herself from the sofa. The air whispered coolly against her skin and her nakedness frightened her. She had showed him more than her skin.

“Forget the painting, my lord,” she said quickly, finding her chemise. “It was a foolish idea. I can’t stay.”

She dressed, expecting him to stop her, to call her coward as she was calling herself. But was it cowardice or pride that drove her hands to refasten her dress?

“I should never have inconvenienced you in such a way, here in your home.” She knew she rambled but she didn’t dare look at him. He hovered in the periphery of her vision—a large, dark, still shape. She imagined that cold, mocking look he did so well. “Thank you for your time.”

“You don’t have to leave.”

Relief flooded her at his words and finally, feet fully encased back in her shoes, and hands tucked into her warm muff, she met his gaze. It wasn’t cold, or mocking, or even desirous. He looked...vaguely surprised.

She smiled, a sweet pleasure creeping through her, slowly making her giddy. “No, my lord, I truly do.”

He found himself frustrated. Snow had set a layer of white over the town and as much as he was happy to be back in England, he missed the vibrancy of summer. His painting of Sarah Leighton stood still on his easel, unfinished. He hadn’t touched his paints in days, had little desire to with her half hewn figure staring at him, the memory of her so much more vivid than anything he could put down on canvas.

My body is a landscape. He heard her voice in his head, pushing him, taunting him. She wasn’t foreign or exotic in any way, but the thought of her wouldn’t leave his head. He could have had her. If he had made his move a moment earlier or held her a second longer, she would have melted back into his embrace. But he had let her go, let her strange mood and sudden chill take her away.

Now he tried to satisfy himself with the woman who should have been foremost in his affections. Unlike Sarah, Carlotta Bruni expected to be pursued, would never herself desire to or need to pursue anyone. It had taken a persistent courtship to get her agree, to consider his suit, and now here they were. She lounged across from him at the dining table in the private parlor he had hired, sparkling with more jewels than the emeralds he had gifted to her.

The table had been cleared and both he and Carlotta sipped at their drinks. She watched at him with a confident, satisfied expression, her full lips just barely curled up at the corners.

“Orville,” she purred his given name. Her voice was rich and rounded but it was sounding the wrong name, the name he hated.

“Harrison.”

She stood languidly, shrugging as she did so. “Harrison is so formal. It’s what all your male associates address you as. It will never do for making love. What shall I call you when I’m caught in rising passion, urging you on inside of me?”

In all these weeks, she had been teasing and flirtatious, sensuous yet still reserved. Here, she was acknowledging her submission to him, announcing he had won his suit. Her words were making the blood course fast through his body, hardening his length, wetting his tongue. He stayed where he was, let her come to him, drape herself across his body. Her soft, rounded derriere warmed him perfectly. Just like always, he had exactly what he wanted.

He ran his thumb across the swell of her breasts. She had that perfect creamy coloring that had made Farthing, in one of his portraits, place a suggestive platter of peaches in the foreground. Sarah’s skin had been paler, blue veins a visible map across her chest. Her nipples had been pale as well. Curious now, Harrison tugged at the fabric of Carlotta’s bodice.

“You’ll rip it,” she warned with a laugh, as he pulled the tight fabric down. He ignored her, focused on moving dress and chemise away. Freed from its constraint, her breast came fully into view, the large nipples a dusky rose. He fit his mouth to the hard bud, sucked and rounded it with his tongue. He shifted his hips, and with his hands found hers to fit her more accommodatingly above him. He heard a soft moan escape her lips, felt her hands come up to rest on his shoulders. Would Sarah taste like this, of cream and winter? Would she moan like that at his mouth on her nipple? He knew already the way she responded to his touch. Likely she would approach this love-making with the same forwardness she had undertaken her pursuit of him.

And what the devil was he doing thinking about her when he had Carlotta in his arms?

He let go of her nipple slowly, allowing his teeth to graze the textured skin.

“Ah, this is a good friendship, Harry.” That carefully cultured voice, designed to caress his skin with every syllable.

A good friendship, yes. He dragged his tongue over her breast, toward where the curve melded into flatter plains. *My body is a landscape*. Would the damn woman not leave his mind? A woman’s body was a landscape, but the one before him was all wrong. He desired it. Had desired it. Had anticipated everything about this consummation with Carlotta. Only, now he desired something else.

She pushed away from him, her mood seeming to have shifted, just as his had. “Perhaps we should finish discussing the finer points of our arrangement. I know your solicitor will have the papers available tomorrow to sign, but I have another requirement to add.”

He heard her words clearly, like cold water upon the already dying flames of his interest. He was reminded that no contracts *had* been signed.

December loomed up with early snow and briefly changed London from a dirty city of soot and refuse into a fairyland of soft, white flakes. Sarah liked the white; it was restful, peaceful, far different from the turmoil that had been giving her stomachaches ever since she had undressed for Lord Harrison.

The scent of roses wafted into the room as the door opened.

“What’s this?”

“Flowers for you, Miss Leighton,” Anna said with a wide-eyed expression. “There are four others downstairs.”

“Five bouquets? Whatever have I done?” She searched her mind for the events of the night before, of the week’s nights, but she could come up with nothing out of the ordinary.

The card read George Edgeworth. Edgeworth! She had heard of him but never met him. Why on earth would a man she had never met be sending her his compliments? The other three were from men she knew only in passing.

Perplexed but pleased, she padded into the morning room, where Annie was even now bringing in a tray of breakfast. The paper was ironed and carefully folded on the side, opened to the gossip page.

"I told you I don't want the paper anymore!" In fact, she had banned the rag two weeks earlier, the day she had come home from Lord Harrison's shaken and devastated. She didn't want to read about him gallivanting about town. Or about anyone else the gossip cared to follow.

She picked up the hot cup of chocolate and warmed her hands.

"Get rid of it."

"It caught my eye, miss," Anna protested, pointing to an article. "You're in the paper!"

"What?" Sarah sat down in the striped chair quickly, placing the cup back on the table and replacing it in her hands with the paper.

There at the top, the headline: *Lord Harrison's Newest Landscape*.

The article described Harrison as a rogue artist, whose painting showed his lack of training, his lack of precision. The author went on to describe the artwork, the way he had melded a fanciful English countryside with the body of a naked woman rising. An earthy, beguiling woman who was revealed this morning to be none other than the London courtesan, Sarah Leighton.


He had finished the painting. He had finished it and then displayed it. With her left hand she tugged the frilled edging of her dressing gown closer together. Her body, on display for all. It was appalling. It was...

A pounding on the front door disrupted her thoughts.

Anne strode from the room. Sarah could hear an exchange, a fumbling of bulky items. Just as she heard the door close, she stood. She met her maid in the entryway, where Anne was lifting another large bouquet from the floor.

"They adore you!"

It was everything Sarah had ever wanted.

 he went to the gallery. She needed an escort naturally; it would hardly do to arrive alone and stare at a painting of herself. However, she needed the right escort. A man whose stature in society would cement her own rising one. The ideal situation, of course, would be to view the painting on the arm of the artist. But Sarah would be caught dead before she ever approached him again.

She wondered why Lord Harrison had finished the piece. What had compelled him? She knew very well he had been seen escorting Carlotta Bruni about town not twenty-four hours after that kiss, and that the emerald bracelet did indeed grace the woman's wrist. It had been painful at first, a reminder to Sarah that she would always be second rung.

"I am quite astonished you haven't seen it," Edgeworth declared as he held the door open for her. He was a slim, good-looking man, dressed impeccably. Not a single thrill filled her at his attentions. Not even the pleasure of knowing he wanted her, that this rich and powerful man was here at her beck and call, had come bearing gifts, kissing her wrist and promising her every delight possible if she would only be his.

Sarah laughed. "I do hope I shall approve of it. Are there really flowers growing out of my head?" "How unpoetic, Miss Leighton!" Edgeworth said huskily, taking her arm more firmly in


his, drawing her in closer. “Especially when it is obvious that Lord Harrison looked at you with nothing but poetry in his eyes. When I saw you in person for the first time this evening, I confess, in that instant my poetic soul was born.”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t, for at that moment, they stepped forward, past two men who—whispering and staring at her—moved aside, and she was confronted with a vision of herself. *His* vision of her.

He had truly taken her suggestion that her body was a landscape to heart. Indeed, she had never seen or heard of such a piece of art before. There were the mountains of her breast, topped with pale nipples she knew too well. There was the cleft between her legs, and a field of clover blanketing her mound. Not quite a topiary, she thought with a little laugh. He had shown her with her neck arched back, her hair streaming behind her, strewn with flowers and melding into a field. Yet she looked out from the corner of her eyes at the viewer.

Sarah met her own eyes, her own gaze, and finally knew what Lord Harrison had seen that day.

No wonder he had kissed her. No wonder he had painted her. She was magnificent. And she had looked at him as if he held her fate in his hands.

 he had seen the painting. Harrison knew this because the gossip columns had proclaimed the event as loudly as if it had been news of the King. They said she had laughed. And that she was on the arm of George Edgeworth. Edgeworth! Harrison had wanted to throttle the man, to throttle any man with whom she kept company.

It was ridiculous. He hadn’t been able to get her out of his mind since that day. Even as he had kissed Carlotta Bruni, even as he had fastened the bracelet on her wrist, and later licked the rounded globe of her breast, flickered his tongue across her nipple, wanting desperately for the welcoming release of a woman’s body, he had thought of *her*.

Carlotta had been angry, had called him fickle when he had left her, left both of them unfulfilled. But he knew that Sarah was right. When she had looked at him, her gaze offering everything she had told him he wanted, he had known she was right. He had wanted all of it. With a deep yearning desire he had never before known. And Carlotta would never give it to him. If he had sunk himself inside her, he would have been making a promise—it wasn’t a promise he wanted to keep for any length of time.

Harrison had stayed away from Sarah because he had his own Sarah in his mind that he was trying to capture in paint, to immortalize. And he had done that. Now, with that painting hanging in a gallery, he was left empty. He needed the reality.

What kept him from visiting her, from begging his way into her bed, was respect. She had left him that afternoon after their brief embrace, had told him no as if the very idea of relations with him would break her into a million pieces.

The situation was beyond ridiculous. She was a courtesan. He was a man. There should have been no confusion, no overemotional silent language, merely a business contract between two

parties, an exchange of services for goods. Clearly, after deciding he would not engage in such an exchange, she had moved on to a man who would. A man much smarter than Harrison.

It was almost Christmas. He had his family here in London, his children.

Perhaps a mistress was more trouble than the idea was worth, in any event.

I am staying in today,” Sarah announced, rolling deeper into her covers and turning away from her maid. It was late, early afternoon already, but Sarah had taken to sleeping-in the last sennight. It was childish of her to brood like this, to ignore the ever so important matter of her career. George Edgeworth would not wait forever; at some point flirtatious avoidance would lead to anger. She would have to give him an answer soon.

If she didn’t choose Edgeworth, who was exactly the sort of man that would keep her in the eye of society and celebrated by the poets and artist as a muse—there were now four other portraits of her making the rounds of London—she would have to decide upon one of the other beaux who sent her flowers and gifts. Or she would have to take an early retirement. It was a sign of the sad state of affairs that she had already scanned the papers for advertisements of modest little apartments in less fashionable parts of town.

“Would you like to break your fast up here, miss?”

With a weary sigh, Sarah waved Anna away.

It wasn’t that she wanted respectability. No, it was nothing so pedestrian that Sarah craved. She wanted to be with a man she adored. She wanted, despite the fact that sexual relations and intimacy were services she rendered, to feel something for one of the men she took to her bed. No, it was worse than that. She still wanted Harrison.

As time had passed, her desire for him had evolved from the petulant goal of a woman who had never fully attained her dreams. Thanks to him, she now had the admiration of London. And thanks to his art, she even knew that he truly had admired her himself.

She simply wanted to taste it again on her lips, welcome it into her body, revel in that visceral scorching heat with which he had seared her with every touch.

A slight scratching and then the creak of the door opening announced Anna’s return. Sarah sighed and stretched, shifting as she did so until she could see her maid, and the silver tray in her hand. She sat up against the pillows, yanking the linens up with her to keep the chill air off her naked breasts.

“There’s a man below, miss.”

Sarah took the cup of chocolate first and then plucked up the calling card from the salver. Orville Steyne, Lord Harrison.

“Tell him to wait,” Sarah said slowly, thinking through her wardrobe, through the fastest yet most attractive toilette she could accomplish. “I’ll be down shortly. Bring him tea if he wishes, or that Madeira Lord Phillip brought.”

“Yes, miss.” When Sarah finally did descend to her sitting room, she knew she had attained the perfect balance of deshabelle and elegance. She had left her hair down, which perhaps

was verboten in polite society, but when one was a courtesan, one knew that men were entranced by long, silky hair, by hair they could grab and use to pull a woman close. Her breath caught at the thought of Harrison dragging her towards him, holding her that tight, capturing her in his embrace. She indulged the thought as she stepped across the threshold. Surely he wouldn't be here unless—

Then she stopped, stared at him. He was looking out her window and his broad back faced her. If he were hers, she would come up behind him and wrap her arms about his waist. She had done that on occasion with her previous lovers, but in that other life it had been out of design, not out of the insistent desire to simply be close.

She took a step forward.

He turned.

And she lost her breath again at simply the sight of him, commanding the room as if it were his, as if she were.

“Why are you here?”

“You know why.”

She took another step, felt the edge of carpet beneath her feet.

“What of Carlotta Bruni?”

His body seemed to tighten under his clothes.

“I want you.”

He stepped forward this time, strode toward her, reached out to take her. Sarah held up one hand and stopped him.

“You cannot always have what you want.”

He took her hand in his, his ungloved hand, which made her skin nearly melt with sensation. He pulled her toward him, caught her off balance and she found herself falling against his chest. Then he surrounded her with his body, his other hand wrapping itself in her hair.

“Can't I?”

She laughed, slanted her gaze up to meet his.

“No. But you're very lucky, as you happen to be what I want as well.”

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