

BARBARA MONAJEM

NOTORIOUS
ELIZA

Undone!

Notorious Eliza

Barbara Monajem



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Eliza Dauntry was infamous. Most people assumed she was a wanton because she supported herself and her son by painting portraits of courtesans. Yet Eliza hadn't been tempted by a man since her husband's death...until she met Patrick Felham. An old friend of her husband and a one-time rake, Patrick awakened a yearning in Eliza that demanded to be satisfied at once....

Patrick was looking for an upright woman to become his wife and stepmother to his daughter, not a siren like Eliza Dauntry! But Eliza had aroused his desire ever since he saved her scandalous self-portrait from the auction house.

The chance of an affair with the alluring widow was irresistible, but this notorious woman could also turn out to be his perfect bride...

To Clio, muse of history, and Erato, muse of love-poetry,
This offering is humbly dedicated.

It isn't history (it's definitely fiction),
And it isn't love-poetry (because it's prose),
But hopefully you won't mind.

I'd wanted to write a Regency for years,
And I'd dabbled without much success,
But when Harlequin asked for new authors for Undone!
I thought, I *must* do this!
You came down from Olympus, perched on my
shoulders, and showed me how.
So although in this earthly realm I'm obliged to take the
credit,
You and I both know where it really belongs.

Thank you!

London, March 1800

Eliza Dauntry frowned at the portrait on the easel, then at the naked woman sprawled on the sofa. Something was amiss with the pink tints underlying the skin on her breasts and belly. Eliza hated not getting her portraits exactly right. On the other hand, she had come to loathe painting nudes. She didn't think a not-quite-perfect pink would matter to the rake who had commissioned the portrait of his mistress. Most likely, he wouldn't notice the difference.

She flicked a glance at the rake, who had insisted on watching while Eliza worked. He wasn't looking at the portrait, nor at his voluptuous mistress.

Instead his gaze was fixed on Eliza in an all too familiar way.

The rake dismissed his mistress with a flick of the hand. "That's enough for now, love. Mrs. Dauntry and I wish to talk."

Oh, no. Not another one. Eliza Dauntry braced herself to deal with the rake. The trollop, justly annoyed, snatched her wrapper from the sofa but flounced away without covering her nakedness. The

rake couldn't help watching the bounce of his mistress's breasts and the jiggle of her thighs, but Eliza knew his desire was now directed at herself.

Damn! Neither frumpy clothing, nor hair going any which way, nor smudges of paint on her nose made any difference at all. According to these indiscriminate lechers, a woman who painted one's mistress in the nude—lavishly, wantonly nude—must be partial to being naked herself.

In a sense, they were correct, but Eliza had been a widow for five years, and although she missed sprawling naked with David, there had never been anyone else and likely never would be.

Definitely not this one.

Perhaps she should accept the commission proposed by Lord Lansdowne in a letter received that morning. A month spent at his country estate would put the cap on her ruined reputation, but he had offered her a small fortune, enough to send James, her son, to a good school for years. More important, Lansdowne was old as Methuselah. Too ancient to bed her, and he didn't hold orgies anymore.

Meanwhile, the rake approached; a predatory gleam in his eye.

Eliza checked that her palate knife was handy, took a deep breath and prepared to defend her honor. Again.

London, several weeks later

Patrick Felham adjusted his cravat before the pier-glass. Why was he so damned nervous? He had been married once before, and apart from the death of his wife, everything had gone well. He had every reason to believe Miss Wilbanks would accept his offer.

Judging by the well-appointed saloon to which he had been conducted, the butler thought so, too. Patrick's character and appearance were generally considered more than acceptable. Although he had no title, he was heir to his great-uncle Lord Lansdowne's lands and fortune.

The door opened. It would not do to show embarrassment at being caught preening, so he brushed an imaginary speck from his sleeve before turning to make his bow.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Felham, but Miss Wilbanks is indisposed." The butler seemed...uneasy. There was a distinctly undignified fidget in his stance, and was that sweat on his balding pate?

"She would be most happy to receive you another day, sir." The butler held the door wide, evidently intending to conduct Patrick speedily outdoors.

Patrick let out a breath. He'd wanted to get the thing over and done with. "I'm sorry to hear that." He preceded the butler toward the entrance hall. "Please convey my—"

An unearthly shriek came from the storey above. "Dismiss the bitch! I'll not have her touch me again. Not my hair, not my clothing, not my jewels—"

“Quick, sir, please!” The butler pushed Patrick through the hall to the front door. Out on the steps, his rheumy old eyes met Patrick’s. “Please excuse the liberty, sir, but she’ll have the hide out of me if she knows you heard her having a tantrum.”

Patrick ran his fingers under his cravat. Sweet, lovely Miss Wilbanks, a perfect, conformable lady and ideal stepmother for Lucy, his only daughter, was not so sweet after all.

Another narrow escape. “Damnation.”

“Indeed, sir.” The butler’s gaze was sympathetic. “Find someone else to marry.”

“I’ll do that.” Hah. What was this, his third seriously flawed prospect? Fourth? Were there no true ladies left alive?

Lucy was already eight years old. His housekeeper did her best, but Lucy needed a lady’s tutelage to prepare her for Polite Society. He *must* find her a mother.

Patrick put a guinea in the butler’s palm. No, the old fellow deserved more compensation for putting up with such a mistress. He scooped all the remaining coins from his pocket and thrust them at the man, then strode hurriedly down the street.

Time to resume the search for a wife. Again.

But not quite yet. He left London the following day, and the late spring evening was closing in when he reached the sleepy Sussex village where he acted as

steward of the Lansdowne estate. He left his horse at the Anchor and walked down the street to the substantial brick house at the far end.

“Papa!” Lucy flew down the corridor and into his arms.

He hugged his daughter tight and followed her to the kitchen, where Mrs. Higgins, the housekeeper, had just set out Lucy’s supper. “I’ll eat in here with Lucy,” he said.

He ate a simple meal of bread and cheese and listened somewhat absently to Lucy’s chatter, at least half his mind on the daunting wife-hunt, when he noticed the extraordinary number of times she mentioned someone called James.

“Who,” he asked, “is James?”

“I *told* you,” Lucy said. “He showed me how to play marbles, and I taught him to fish. We made swords and shields, and I got to be a knight. James has his very own watercolours. May I have watercolors, too? Mrs. Dent and the Uncharitables don’t like James, but you will, Papa.”

“Will I?” He raised his brows at Mrs. Higgins, who evaded his eyes and put the kettle on the hob. How strange. Mrs. Higgins usually took pride in disagreeing with prosy, proper Mrs. Dent, who taught pianoforte and set far too high a value on herself. Moreover, she didn’t even chide Lucy for using Patrick’s pet name for the Ladies’ Charitable Sewing Circle.

“Some days James doesn’t care to be a knight, so he is a troubadour instead. He won’t let me be a troubadour because I can’t sing,” Lucy said.

“I take it James *can* sing.” Patrick cast another glance at Mrs. Higgins. She twisted her fingers in her apron and continued to avoid his eyes. Damn it all, what now?

“Yes, but the cat at the Anchor doesn’t make a good fair maiden. When James sings to her, she puts her nose in the air and stalks away.”

So far, Patrick hadn’t suffered that sort of rejection, but judging by recent experience, it would be all for the best.

“But the vicar heard James singing to the cat, and now he wants James to sing in church. James would like that, but Mrs. Dent fussed and fussed and *fussed*. She told Mrs. Higgins the Uncharitables would be scandalized, and that she would not play the organ if James and his mama came. But James’s mama told the vicar no, thank you, because they were going to Chichester instead to see the cathedral.”

“A pity, but perhaps we will be spared Mrs. Dent some other Sunday.”

Ordinarily Mrs. Higgins would delight in a jest at Mrs. Dent’s expense. Today, her fidgeting reminded him strongly of Miss Wilbanks’s butler.

Lucy sighed. “No, James’s mama told him they will visit St. Olave’s next, because it is so old. After that they will go home to London.”

Once Patrick had tucked Lucy into bed and kissed her good-night, he returned to the kitchen.

"I'm very sorry, sir, if I've done wrong letting Miss Lucy play with Master James," Mrs. Higgins said. "But I dared not go against the old lord. Would you care for some tea, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, if you will join me." Perhaps that would reassure her. "Now, who is this boy James, and what has Lord Lansdowne to do with him?"

"If I might make the tea first, sir?" He nodded patiently, and she bustled about the kitchen with a frenzied clinking of teapot, bowls and saucers. Why couldn't she just come out and say it, whatever it was?

When the tea was in the pot, the bowls and saucers and sugar on the table and Mrs. Higgins perched on the edge of her chair, he tried again. "Tell me all about James, and don't look so worried. Everything will be fine."

"Master James is a good boy, sir, as polite and well-behaved as one could wish."

"He sounds unexceptionable, so what is the problem?"

She pleated her apron between her hands. "It's the mother, sir. The old lord hired her to paint, er, up at the Court..." Her voice drifted unhappily.

"Lord Lansdowne hired a *woman* to cover the improper murals in the ballroom?" Obscene was more like it. No wonder Mrs. Higgins was so perturbed. She had never seen the ballroom, but she'd heard enough from servants at Lansdowne Court to fire a lurid

imagination. Even so, he doubted her imaginings came even close to what had actually taken place there in Uncle Lionel's heyday.

Hence the ultimatum Patrick had issued to his incorrigible uncle: he would marry again and move his family into the Court to keep the old lord company in his last years, on one condition—that he paint over the orgies on the ballroom walls. “I can't bring a respectable woman here,” he'd said. Already, he had steadfastly refused to bring Lucy for visits unless the ballroom was locked and barred.

Surprisingly Uncle Lionel had agreed. “Go to London. Maybe this Wilbanks chit will be the one. When you return, the ballroom will be as good as new.”

Damn Uncle Lionel. The old roué had never cared for propriety. Patrick, as his uncle's steward, should have insisted on making arrangements for the ballroom walls himself, but Uncle Lionel, in failing health but imperious as ever, had waved him away to look for a wife.

Devious old devil. “Why didn't he get some workmen to do it?”

“I'm sure I don't know, sir. She's been at it for three weeks now, going on four.”

Four weeks to paint the ballroom walls? “The woman's *staying* at Lansdowne Court?”

“Oh, no, sir, she's in the best bedchamber at the Anchor with her own private parlor, everything paid for by Lord Lansdowne. His lordship sends the gig for

her every morning. Mrs. Pear at the Anchor says as she's a pleasant lady, quiet and keeps to herself, but dearie me, sir, what lady would agree to so much as *look upon them walls?*"

The answer hit Patrick like a bludgeon.

Only one.

Mrs. Higgins was talking again. "What with the painter lady not wanting her boy seeing that nasty room at the Court, and not happy leaving him with strangers neither—he's of an age with Miss Lucy—the old lord told me to keep an eye on him. I'm sure I'm very sorry if you're vexed, sir. Mrs. Dent says you'll turn me off for harboring the son of an abandoned hussy, but I ask you, Mr. Felham, sir, what else could I do?"

"You did very well, Mrs. Higgins. I am not in the least vexed, and you should know better than to listen to Mrs. Dent's spite." It seemed pointless, but Patrick had to be sure. "What is James's surname?"

"Dauntry, sir. James Dauntry. Miss Lucy will be right sad to see him go. Would you care for a slice of plum cake?"

"You hired *Eliza Dauntry?*" The next morning, Patrick paced back and forth on the hearth rug in Uncle Lionel's bedchamber. Lord Lansdowne lay propped by a quantity of pillows, the eyes in his raddled countenance brighter than Patrick had seen them in months.

“Why not? If I’d left it up to you, you’d have whitewashed the walls and let your new wife paper them over in spirals and roses. Are you engaged to the Wilbanks chit?”

“What?” With difficulty, Patrick dragged his mind away from the visions of Eliza Dauntry that had haunted his sleep. “No, I changed my mind. She won’t do.”

“Ah,” his great-uncle said. “Well, the Dauntry’s doing a bang-up job on the walls. I knew she’d see it my way. *She* knows a beautiful piece of art when she sees one. Discussed the project without so much as a blush. Clever, too. She’s transforming the orgies into something entirely innocent, as long as one doesn’t know what’s underneath. Almost more titillating than the original, if you ask me, and your namby-pamby wife, whoever she may be, need never know.”

Patrick ground his teeth. So much for agreeing to the ultimatum. “That’s impossible, sir, unless Mrs. Dauntry has painted over virtually everything on the blasted walls.”

“Go see for yourself,” Lord Lansdowne said. Patrick must have made a face, for his uncle added, “When did you become such a prude? You sowed plenty of wild oats in your day. Ran with a fast set, as I recall, and as for that wife of yours... Amanda was a woman after my heart. Set the ton by the ears more times than I can remember, and I’ll bet she was lively in bed.” He grimaced. “She’d not be pleased with what you’ve become, lad.”

"She would have settled down sooner or later," Patrick said. "We all do."

Uncle Lionel made a rude noise. "The Dauntry hasn't, I can tell you that. The gleam in that woman's eyes... Have you ever met her?"

Hell, yes.

"Once or twice," Patrick said, keeping his voice cool. "We didn't move in the same circles, but David Dauntry was a boyhood friend."

"That's right, I remember now. The Dauntry's a tantalizing piece, even in the sack she wears to paint. Not beautiful, precisely, but if I were twenty years younger..." He sighed. "I bought one of her paintings, you know. Sandcourt's mistress. He had to sell everything a year or two ago, so I snapped it up."

I have one of her paintings, too.

"That's what made me think of hiring her," Uncle Lionel said. "She understands lust."

I know. I have her self-portrait.

Patrick had bought the damned thing—he'd had to threaten the greedy auctioneer—before it got put on the block with everything else David owned. Then, Patrick had thought of it as a protective gesture. Amanda had been alive then, and he'd only allowed himself enough of a glimpse to be sure it was indeed the self-portrait David had mentioned one day when in his cups. Patrick had put it in an attic and all but forgotten it until several months ago, when he'd begun planning for remarriage.

He couldn't burn it. Uncle Lionel's opinion notwithstanding, Patrick knew a magnificent painting when he saw one.

Nor could he sell it; David might be long dead, but Mrs. Dauntry was very much alive. Just because she made her living painting other men's mistresses, it didn't mean she should be subjected to the lewd gaze of the highest bidder.

So he had kept it. He should take this opportunity to return it to her.

Hell, no. Which meant, he supposed, that he was as bad as the rest, but at least he wouldn't display it for hordes of dissolute friends to see. The very idea appalled him. *He* might look at the portrait—he had done so, several times since Amanda's death—but that was different.

Or was it? He conjured, in his mind's eye, the Eliza Dauntry he'd met so long ago. If ever he'd been attracted to another man's wife, it had been she. Back then, he'd dismissed the thought even as it surfaced. He would never betray his own wife or his friend.

To be honest, he shouldn't intrude upon Eliza's privacy now. If she wouldn't want him looking at her portrait, he shouldn't.

On the other hand, everything in him rebelled at the thought of asking her if she wanted it back.

Uncle Lionel had put him in an impossible position.

"Go have a look," Lord Lansdowne said. "Use the secret room."

"Watch her through a *peephole*? By God, Uncle—"

The old lord chuckled. “Don’t get all hot under the cravat. She doesn’t like people watching her working. Told me so, but what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. Take a peek.” He laughed again. “I dare you.”

The hair on the back of Eliza’s neck stood to attention. Old Lord Lansdowne was watching her again.

Not that she really minded. Being watched didn’t bother her, but rather the lewd talk that generally went along with it. As it turned out, Lansdowne wasn’t a bad sort. He did nothing more than look at her with an appreciative glint in his eye, and he had agreed to every one of her terms.

His steward wouldn’t be best pleased when he learned his daughter had become fast friends with the son of the infamous Mrs. Dauntry, but the man hadn’t returned yet, and her job, thank God, was almost done. James had grown accustomed to parrying insults, but that didn’t mean they didn’t hurt. He had lost playmates before and cheerfully gone out to find more. Street urchins, some of them, but as long as James didn’t take to thieving, she considered it just another form of education.

The old lord’s servants must be getting better at helping him silently into that secret room. This time, Eliza hadn’t heard a thing. She just *knew*. She turned casually and flicked her eyes along the wall with the peepholes. Sure enough, the one behind Poseidon was

open, making a slit darker than the billows of sea between one of the trident's prongs.

Why not give the old lord a little show? His fun was almost over. He was preparing for his own demise, poor man, covering up his beloved orgies because no one would want to live here otherwise. Eliza had come up with a good compromise. She hoped he lived long enough to enjoy it.

Why shouldn't she have a little fun, too?

She pulled the ribbon from her hair—it needed retying anyway—and tossed it on the table. She ran her fingers through the tangles until the waves fell long and lush across her shoulders and down her back.

She stretched, thrusting her bosom forward, arching her back and closing her eyes. This wasn't quite as vulgar and gratuitous as it seemed, or so she told herself. After nigh-on a month painting in one awkward position and another, her muscles were giving her hell. She ran her hands slowly over her bosom and down across her belly, then let them linger caressingly on her thighs. He wouldn't see much of her curves otherwise, given the shapelessness of her painting smock. It couldn't be more harmless: she got the fun of titillating a man who posed no threat, and he got some enjoyment in return.

She rolled her shoulders, infusing her movements with sensuous languor, and raised her arms over her head, stretching to one side and then the other, swaying slightly. What next? She turned her back to the peephole, spread her legs and took her time

bending over. He wouldn't see more than the curve of her bottom, but even if his equipment was worn-out, his imagination wouldn't be...

She stood, sighing. Enough of that; she must get back to work if she wished to finish by the end of the week. She drew her hair into a loose plait and tied it with the ribbon.

She had left the most difficult panel till last. Of all the copulating couples she had disguised with everything from bushes to sea foam, curtains to card tables and stampedes of bespectacled pigs (she had been in a particularly irritable mood that day, thanks to the unpleasant Mrs. Dent and her cronies), this pair eluded her. They seemed so—so gloriously absorbed in one another. They were locked together not only by the sexual act, but by the love in their eyes.

It reminded her of bedding David. He'd been such fun, and sometimes, with little more than a look, he had sent her over the moon. In that self-portrait—the worst loss of all David's possessions—she'd painted herself waiting in breathless, wanton anticipation for David to merge with her, to enrapture her with his eyes and make her come.

She didn't want to cover this couple, the only truly loving pair in the whole ballroom. She wondered if the unknown artist who'd painted the murals had grown sick of portraying lust and put his artist's soul into the last panel. She wandered over to the ancient console table that held her supplies to leaf through her

sketchbook again. She'd drawn the couple ten, twelve times, each under a different disguise.

She dropped the sketches onto the table. She hated them all.

Back at the wall, Eliza ran a dry paintbrush over the paneling, over the juncture of the lovers' thighs, envisioning the strokes, framing this way and that with her eyes and hands, trying to see them as anything but two people whose lust and love had blended into one.

Oh dear. She straightened and heaved an unhappy sigh.

Excellent, thought Patrick, as he fought his erection to manageable proportions and softly, ever so softly, pushed the secret door open. Uncle Lionel must have kept it well-oiled, for it didn't make a sound. He was only a few feet from Eliza Dauntry, and she hadn't heard a thing.

Strange. He'd been so bloody nervous approaching those well-bred virgins to make honorable offers of marriage. Making a move—a most dishonorable move—on the siren of his dreams fazed him not at all. She was an alluring widow, and judging by that little performance, even if it was only meant for the old lord, she was ripe for pleasure. Why not, as long as they were discreet?

To hell, for the moment, with suitable virgins. Now and then, a man should do what he wanted. Like a skin he'd forgotten, his old ways enveloped him, warmed

him, urged him on. He squeezed through the narrow opening, closed the door and spoke.

“Well done, Mrs. Dauntry. A bang-up job.”

Eliza whirled, one hand on the palette knife in her belt, the other wielding her paintbrush like a sword. Just when she thought she had made it unmolested through the most lucrative commission of her life—

The man who lounged against the paneling was a stranger. A tall, dark stranger in shirt, waistcoat and breeches, with wicked eyes and a sardonic twist to his mouth.

“Who the devil are you?” Eliza demanded. She hadn’t heard him come into the ballroom, nor his footsteps as he crossed the bare boards of the floor.

How could she have been so absorbed in her thoughts as to not notice a large male only ten feet away?

It must be some sort of divine chastisement for indulging the wrong sort of thoughts. For giving in to a little temptation...

Damnation. The watcher behind the peephole today had not been Lord Lansdowne at all. A flush, part shame, part anger, and way too much heat, crawled up her body to her throat.

Damn the man, and herself for caring. How could one alter murals of orgies for weeks without being in a perpetual state of semiarousal?

She had had enough. Today she would paint an anvil over the lovers and be done with it. But first, she would send this intruder back where he came from.

He raised his hands in the universal male gesture of feigned innocence. "Lower the weapon, Mrs. Dauntry. Let go of the knife. I'm not dangerous."

She stifled a snort, but did as he suggested. She was sufficiently accustomed to lust-driven men to know when she stood in any immediate peril. This one would want a willing participant. She would humor him, as she had all the rest, and hope he would get bored and go away.

Still, how had he got here? "Where did you come from?" He wore substantial boots and could not have tiptoed across the wood floor unheard. The only carpet was the braided rug she moved from place to place as she painted, so as not to sit or kneel on the cold, bare floor.

"Does it matter?" His mouth curved slightly at the corners. It was an attractive mouth, with lips that laughed even without moving. A mouth meant for bed games.

She should really get back to work. "Of course it does. As I told Lord Lansdowne, I do not appreciate intruders when I am working." She amended that. "Nor at any other time."

"An intruder, am I? What a novel idea. I quite thought I belonged here."

Come to mention it, he did look familiar, but not at all like the old lord, which was no surprise, as there

were no male relatives to inherit the title and this pile. The man looked to be thirty or more, and was much easier to look at than most of those who gave in to curiosity and came to watch. The fact that she painted men's mistresses never stopped them from eyeing her with interest, even when she was clothed from neck to ankles while the doxies were sprawled more or less naked for their delectation.

Women weren't supposed to paint dirty pictures, but it paid well. How else could she afford to send James to a gentlemen's school, as his father would have wished? As James deserved.

"Perhaps I'm a ghost," the man said. "Perhaps, if you approach and wave your hand, it will pass right through me." His hint of a grin tantalized her. "Why not try it and find out?"

This time she didn't stifle the snort. She wasn't moving an inch closer to this one. *Keep it prosaic. Make him think you're deadly dull.* "Sorry, but I don't believe in ghosts."

He tsked. "How unromantic of you, Mrs. Dauntry. This is an old house, so of course there are several." He cocked his head to one side. "Although I shouldn't be surprised if the goings-on here drove them away. Orgies can be so tedious." He waved his hand at the murals she had slaved over. "You've done a magnificent job of covering them up."

"Thank you. Now go away. If you must pry, stick to the peepholes."

Hopefully he had at least *some* shame. She picked up the palette and moved away to fiddle with the medieval courtesan whose lush figure was now concealed with long, equally lush hair.

“The lunatic nephew,” the man said. “Would that do?”

“I beg your pardon?” She wasn’t entirely satisfied with the match of the new tresses to the old. A discerning observer might notice, imperfectly concealed, the voluptuous nudity underneath.

Oh, to hell with it. If someone wanted to stare at a naked woman, let him. She set down the palette and brush.

Just one panel left, but she couldn’t concentrate on anything new—not even an anvil—with this man hovering close by.

“Shackled to a garret wall, fed scraps by a wizened retainer and escaped at last to wreak vengeance on the wicked lord.”

What was he talking about? Why didn’t he go away?

The stranger motioned to himself. “Me. Family lunatic. It might explain the dithering at peepholes and such.”

She would have thought his grin endearing if she hadn’t been so busy. If he hadn’t been another voyeur. If...

Oh, for heaven’s sake. “I have work to do, Mr. ...er...”

“Felham.” He pushed away from the wall and thrust out a hand. “Patrick Felham.”

The name rang a bell. Without thinking, she clasped his proffered hand.

Mistake. His fingers closed around hers, large and warm, sending a quiver of alarm through her. Physical contact, in such circumstances, should always be avoided.

She pulled her hand away. “You must be the father of the little girl, Lucy.” She hesitated, anxious now for James’s sake. Judging by past experience, this man would angle for an illicit liaison with her, but refuse, oh so righteously, to let his daughter play with her son. Even if the old lord countered him, *she* wouldn’t. She had too much pride left for that.

He nodded; he didn’t *look* as if he was about to insult her. “You don’t recognize me, do you? I suppose it’s not surprising. We only met once or twice, and it was several years ago.” His smile turned rueful. “I knew David quite well.”

Patrick Felham. She didn’t quite recall... *Oh, good heavens.* “Trick Felham? You’re *Trick*?”

He’d watched the emotions play across her face—annoyance, anxiety and that flash of desire—but her smile knocked him dizzy. The sheer joy of it washed over him, her delight as undiluted as the lust in the painting.

What a woman. David had been a lucky man.

She grabbed both Patrick's hands and grinned up at him with mischief in her eyes. "Trick Felham! David loved you so. You were always such fun, he said." She bit her lip. "I remember now. You wore a moustache and beard, didn't you? That's why I didn't know you. How *lovely* to see you again."

Wordlessly he stared down at her, at her hands in his. She had sturdy, short-nailed fingers, a little rough. Competent hands, not soft and weak like those of most ladies he knew, and yet they called to him. They *demand*ed a fervent kiss.

Gently she pulled away, and he let his arms fall to his sides. What in Hades had come over him? He must seem like the lunatic he'd suggested earlier. Certainly no practiced seducer.

"I was always a bit of a rebel," he said, "or perhaps merely an attention-seeker. Everyone else was clean-shaven, so it made me stick out. Metaphysical poetry and facial hair, like Sir Walter Raleigh."

"But no ruff." She trod swiftly away, laughing, to stand before one of the panels, hands on her hips. Over her shoulder, she said, "Lord Lansdowne told me you are his steward. You've seen this room before, so you may recall what was on this panel."

Her conversation dizzied him, too. "Yes," he said. "The man was, er..." *Damn*. One didn't usually discuss oral intimacies until one had bedded a woman at least once or twice.

Or never, judging by the proper little virgins he'd been courting lately. He longed for an experienced, fun-loving woman like this one.

No, that wasn't quite it. He wanted *this* woman. He always had.

She flapped a hand. "Yes, and it took me days to work this one out. All I could think of was putting a ruff on the poor man. Do you think it works?"

It certainly disguised what he'd been doing. The ruff was shoved upward and squashed against the fellow's nose, and the woman now wore a long, rigid stomacher and an embroidered petticoat that covered her indelicately parted legs.

"Not anymore," he said. "You'd better paint the smile off her face, poor girl. You've spoiled all her fun." *And his.*

She stared at Patrick, not the least discomposed, and blew a stray hair away from her face. She might have been looking right through him. "That's it!"

She fetched the brush and palette, mischievous again. "She's thinking of what he might do if that ruff and her gown weren't in the way." With a dab of paint and a flick of the wrist, the woman's expression changed. "Better?"

Incredible. "Anticipation," he said.

"You're right. She's thinking not of what he *might* do, but what he *will*." Heat swept through Eliza. *It's been so long....*

She was still reeling from the unexpected meeting with Patrick Felham. No, more than that: from the first

strong attraction she had felt in five years. That didn't mean she should speak to Trick as she had to David, openly and without any restrictions. However affectionately David had spoken of him, she knew very little of this man—only that he desired her, and that, miraculously, she desired him as well.

Yearning rose, bubbled, steamed up from her lonely, unsatisfied core.

Cool down. Take it slowly. Think.

She moved to the next panel. "Your wife died, didn't she? I don't mingle in society anymore, but one hears a little of the gossip now and then. I was sorry to learn of the accident."

His face darkened. "It's over four years now, and I'm still infuriated at the tattle-mongers. All those 'only to be expecteds' and 'got what she deserved...' Bloody hell, if everyone got what they deserved, half the high-born ladies in London would be obliged to serve their maids on bended knee. See what it felt like to have their ears boxed for trying their best."

Evidently something more recent than Amanda Felham's death had prompted this outburst.

"The other half," he added, "would lose their precious reputations at the flick of some malicious gossip's tongue, while as for the remainder—"

"What remainder? You've already condemned two halves."

He gave a short, sharp laugh and ran a hand through his hair. It was a rich, thick brown, somewhat longer than fashion dictated. She imagined digging her

own hands into that hair and pulling him down to kiss her. Another wave of heat suffused her. She shouldn't allow herself such thoughts, she should stop and think, but when would she get another chance? He was a good man, a friend, as safe a risk as she would ever find.

"Do you mind if I sit?" He indicated the paint-spattered chair by the console table.

She pulled her thoughts into line. "You might want to swipe a rag across the seat first. I don't think I've dropped any paint on it this morning, but you don't want to ruin your breeches."

It occurred to her that he might not have many pairs. His clothes were serviceable rather than fashionable. He'd never been wealthy, as far as she knew, but he must have suffered severe reverses to end up as Lord Lansdowne's steward. Unlucky investments, perhaps, like David. She'd been furious at David for dying, and even more enraged at the improvidence that had left her destitute.

She moved to the next panel, a Roman orgy turned grape-crushing fest. "Mrs. Felham's death aside, why are you so vexed this morning?"

He slumped in the chair. "I've been looking for a new wife."

"Ah." She knelt glumly before the togaed couple, the man's knees flexed, his thighs and biceps beautifully bunched, as he prepared to throw the woman into the air to land, squealing, in a vat of grapes. "Did you find one?" She held her breath.

“God, no.”

She let it out again. If she meant to do this—not that she had decided—she’d have to be quick about it; she couldn’t bed him once he was engaged. In any event, it would be a brief affair, as she was returning to London in a week or so.

How sad. She hadn’t met a man she wanted for five years, and she’d have this one for only a few days.

“That’s why I’ve been away for the past several weeks,” Trick said. “Lucy needs a mother—I can’t prepare her for society. It’s deuced discouraging, I tell you. Their vanity and selfishness aside, the idea of having to start all over again with one of these silly innocents... I’ve never tupp’d a virgin in my life, and I don’t want to begin now.”

Eliza broke out laughing, sending a smear of paint across a bunch of grapes. “Oops. You’re an unusual man, Trick. I may call you that, mayn’t I?”

“If I may call you Eliza.”

“Of course.” She got up and went over to the table to dab some paint onto the palette. She stood close to his chair while doing so; she was no wilting virgin, and she wanted a whiff of this man she was thinking of taking to bed. She breathed him in; leather and the outdoors, and beneath that, the delightful aroma of potent male. Trickle of desire threaded faintly, then more insistently, through her veins. Her heartbeat quickened, and her breathing stumbled to keep up. There was a catch in her voice when she said, “Most men consider a virgin a prize.”

She took the palette and moved away. Just because he smelled marvelous, she mustn't jump into this the way her long-deprived body urged her to do.

He rolled his eyes. "Idiots. A woman with experience is so much more fun."

You have no idea how much fun this one can be.

The trickles of desire threatened to become a torrent. *Too soon.* Eliza picked up the palette and hurried toward the wall, mixing paint with frantic haste. She had reached the Roman panel again when a surprising thought made her turn. It was out before she could stop herself. "Your wife wasn't a virgin when you wed her?"

"Amanda? No, she'd had an affair with a groom when she was fifteen. Learned plenty from him, too, which was to my advantage in the end." He grinned across at her. "She was a handful in more ways than one...." Roguish light flared briefly in his eyes, and then his mouth tightened. "At least she enjoyed her life. She shouldn't have driven that phaeton down St. James's, but the accident wasn't her fault. As for the bastards who said it was my blame for not controlling her..."

Oh, how horrid. How brutally unfair.

"Why would I want to control her? She was—"

He broke off and stood abruptly. "I'm so sorry. You're far too easy to talk to, but I shouldn't burden you with my troubles."

"I don't mind," Eliza said. "If you like, I'll counter with some of my own."

Consternation flickered across his face. “I suppose you’ve had plenty.”

“Droves,” Eliza said cheerfully. “How about it? Share and share alike.”

Their eyes locked. And no, it wasn’t love, not like the couple in the panel, but there was warmth and understanding, budding friendship and desire, which was plenty good enough.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Thank you, Eliza. I have work to do, as do you, but I look forward, with great anticipation, to sharing anything you wish.”

What a sweet, wicked smile.

I want a taste. Now. She gripped his fingers and reached for his other hand.

He bent his head and kissed her.

What blissful heat. Their lips brushed tentatively. Patrick slipped out his tongue to coax hers, and she laughed, a sweet, throaty sound, inviting him into a kiss so deep, so knowing, that they might have been lovers since the beginning of time. Desire, fierce and possessive, built in him with astonishing speed.

They broke apart, breathing heavily, fingers entwined. It was a good thing they had touched only hands and lips; if he got any closer, he would throw her on the floor and take her here and now.

Her breasts rose and fell under the smock. She said, “When?”

Now would be good. He itched to gather the damned garment and throw it over her head. He would suckle her until she wept with pleasure, lick every hot inch of her, delve into her...

He took a deep breath. "When you've had time to think about it and are sure this is what you want to do."

Was he mad? She was looking him up and down in the most wanton way, lingering on the bulge in his breeches, a little smile on her lips.

The smile faded. "I don't *want* to think about it." She sounded downright grumpy. "It's been so *long*."

She dropped his hands and stalked away, then swiveled to face him. "Do you know how many men have made advances to me since David died? Dozens, I swear. They all saw me as a trollop like the women I painted. None of them would have stopped to consider my feelings, had I given in to them. And now, finally, I encounter a man I quite desperately want to go to bed with, and he decides to be chivalrous."

Desperately. He must be mad indeed to make her wait. "I'm not being chivalrous. I'm—"

Confused?

This was the strangest seduction of his life.

She threw up her hands. "All right, then. I'll give you a day to make up your mind."

He laughed and left to go about his duties, supposedly catching up on all that had happened whilst he was absent, unable to think of anything but Eliza. Of how absolutely correct her assessment of him was,

and as the day wore on, how increasingly desperate and uncertain *he* began to feel.

Furious, as well, at the thoughtless bastards who had tried to take advantage of her.

She had started painting nudes at least a year before David's death. That self-portrait had been done after she'd painted a couple of well-known courtesans. The paintings were no secret; in fact, David had been extremely proud of his wife's artwork. Had encouraged it, to be certain.

Why not? She was a brilliant artist, and he'd have made short work of anyone who'd accosted her while he was still alive.

But then he'd died and left her penniless with only one way to support herself, leaving her open to every insult.

Patrick could at least mend that while she was in Sussex. At the end of the day, he went to his uncle. "You needn't send the gig. I'll bring Mrs. Dauntry here myself in the morning."

"Oho!" Uncle Lionel invariably dined early and spent an hour or two in his library with a decanter of port and the newssheets. He poked his magnifying glass in Patrick's direction. "Planning to have a go at her, are you? Well, if I were only *ten* years younger..."

You would behave just as those other bastards have done. To do him justice, Uncle Lionel had never abandoned a woman he'd gotten with child, but he wouldn't have hesitated to importune Eliza Dauntry in every possible way. "At the moment, my only plan is

to see that she is shown the respect she deserves during the rest of her stay.”

Uncle Lionel sat up straight, glaring, and Patrick shook his head. “Not in your house, sir. She says you’ve been most kind, but the gossiping biddies in the village deserve a setdown.”

The old lord shrugged. “The Dauntry must be accustomed to snubs. What else does she expect?”

Patrick left his uncle abruptly and strode across the fields to the village in a fine state of indignation. It must have shown on his face, for as he reached the steps to his house, a thin dark-haired boy opened the door, shot him a scared glance and made as if to dodge past, but suddenly stopped. Stiff. Chin out. “Good evening, sir.”

Lucy appeared in the doorway.

“Good evening.” Patrick stuck out his hand. “You must be James Dauntry. I’m Lucy’s father.”

The boy looked him in the eye and shook his hand firmly in return. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“You have a great look of your father,” Patrick said.

James’s eyes grew round. “You knew my *father*?”

“We were schoolboys together,” Patrick said. Inspiration struck. “I saw your mother today up at Lord Lansdowne’s house. How about if you and she come here to dine one night?”

Lucy squealed. “Oh, yes! Please come!”

Patrick said, “I’ll tell you about the good times your father and I had as boys.”

“We should love to, sir. Thank you!” James leaped down the steps and scampered toward the Anchor.

Excellent.

The next morning, Patrick drove his gig into the inn yard just as James came slowly out the door, kicking his heels against the cobbles.

Patrick tossed the reins to an ostler and jumped down. “Good morning, James.”

“Good morning, Mr. Felham.” He ran appraising eyes over the roan hitched to the gig, but his lips slanted glumly. “She says no.”

“Does she, now?”

Eliza Dauntry emerged carrying a cloak bag. She was dressed in a neat gray round gown, her luxuriant hair pulled firmly back in a knot.

There was an equally uncompromising set to her mouth.

“Run along, then,” Patrick told James. “I’ll see what I can do to change her mind.”

The boy gave him a dubious look, but dashed out of the yard toward Patrick’s house.

Patrick put out his hand for the cloak bag. Eliza’s glare went from Patrick to the gig and back. “Where is the groom who usually comes for me?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Dauntry,” Patrick replied, with a polite bow. “I told Lord Lansdowne that since I live in the village, I would fetch you instead.”

“How very kind.” The brittle words were clearly for the ostler’s benefit. Her face was taut as she handed

him the cloak bag and allowed him to assist her into the gig.

Not until they had left the village and were bowling along between hedgerows did she speak. "Are you out of your mind? Don't you know what people will think?"

"That I enjoy driving a beautiful woman?" He smiled at her. Even in a drab gown with her hair scraped back, she tugged at his vitals.

"They will think you are tugging me!" The roan's ears pricked at the sharpness of her voice.

"Since that is precisely what I hope to do—"

"I thought you, at least, would be discreet. I thought you, as David's friend, might have enough respect for me that—" She turned away, her voice shaking. "You are as vile as the next man."

That hurt. "Eliza, please hear me out before hurling accusations at me."

Her gaze fixed firmly on the hedgerows, she said bitterly, "What choice do I have?"

His heart wrenched, and he pulled the horse to a halt. "The village gossips will choose to believe we are bedding one another regardless of what we actually do. Therefore, their opinions are irrelevant."

"Not to you, perhaps. I have done everything I can to appear respectable, insisting on staying at the inn, wearing these colourless clothes, keeping to myself—"

"Depriving James of the opportunity to sing in the village church."

For a brief instant, he thought she would slap him. “How dare you? They don’t want us there! I do not go where I am not wanted.”

He glanced about; they were under the branches of a vast oak, and no one was in sight. Stupid to have to worry about being seen, but since it mattered to her...

He leaned across and kissed her hard. “*I want you.*” She was breathing quickly, but it couldn’t be entirely from rage, because she didn’t pull away. He cupped her neck in his free hand and kissed her again, long and gently this time.

The roan, which was badly in need of exercise, stamped and snorted at the delay. Patrick broke the kiss, but kept a firm hand on the reins. “The vicar has asked you to come to church. Surely that is all that matters.”

She sighed. “The vicar is a kindhearted man, but I do not wish to cause disruption in the community. According to what I have heard, Mrs. Dent will refuse to play the organ, and many ladies will not attend church if I am there. I am certain the vicar does not want *that*.”

“Mrs. Dent—if she does carry out her threat, which is unlikely—will not be missed, believe you me. As for the others, I doubt they will go to such lengths. They are much attached to the social aspect of churchgoing.”

“They will come to gawk at me, then, as if they expect me to turn into one of Satan’s minions before their very eyes.” Her eyes were on the fields, her voice

infused with bitterness. "No, I tell you. I cannot do it." The roan shook its head irritably. "For heaven's sake, let the blasted horse go."

Patrick dropped his hands, and the gig moved forward again.

"I suppose you think I should send James to church alone," Eliza said in an almost sulky voice.

For the first time, Patrick noticed deep shadows under her eyes. Had she slept badly because of his invitation?

"I tried to persuade him, but he won't, not without me. He is my fiercest defender, and quite as stubborn as I."

"Good for James," Patrick said. "He is an admirable child. Mrs. Higgins speaks highly of him, and that is praise of no mean order."

Her voice softened. "He *is* a good boy, isn't he? I think David would be proud."

"Not a doubt of it."

"Thank you." Her voice was low and wistful, but now it sharpened again. "As for this—this absurd invitation to dine with you, absolutely not. You have no hostess, so of course I cannot come. It would give the gossips good reason to believe me as immoral as they wish."

"Nonsense," Patrick said. "We will be in the same room as James and Lucy at all times, to which Mrs. Higgins will attest." She opened her mouth to protest, and he put up his hand. "We will talk about school

days and play ducks and geese or cribbage or some such. What could be more innocent than that?"

"As you have already said, it doesn't matter what we actually do."

"With Mrs. Higgins's assistance, we will make it perfectly clear to the entire village that I am merely being courteous to the widow of one of my oldest friends."

"A disreputable widow so lost to all sense of right and wrong that she paints nude prostitutes and is not in the least shocked at Lord Lansdowne and his murals."

He almost rolled his eyes. "Do *you* believe it is wrong for you to paint nudes?"

"Of course not! Many artists do so, but generally they are men, so no one objects. It makes no sense at all. *I* do not lust after the subjects of my portraits or make lewd jokes at their expense. I treat them with far more respect and consideration than their protectors generally do." She gave an outraged huff. "And yet *I* am at fault?"

"No, those who misjudge you are." He could not for the life of him see why she needed to be told something she already knew. He guided the gig into the long driveway leading up to the Court. "As for Lord Lansdowne's murals, nothing in those paintings is any different from what goes on between men and women all the time. You are a widow and therefore sexually experienced, so why would you be shocked?"

“Try explaining that to the gossips.” She sighed. “James and I will return to London soon. It’s easier to remain anonymous there.”

A great sadness washed over Patrick. Another week, maybe less, and she would leave. Gad, he’d barely begun to know her.

“You’re not making sense, Eliza. Either you concur with their opinions, in which case you should reform your way of life, or you do not, in which case you *must* ignore them. You cannot disagree with them, but let them destroy you all the same.”

“You don’t understand! People *despise* me. It is—it is *horribly* painful to be despised.”

He raised an arm, but let it fall, as they were within sight of the house. He longed to pull her into his arms, to comfort her, to promise her his protection and support, to assure her of his love.

Love?

Eliza took a deep breath. Trick was a darling, but he couldn’t be expected to understand. “I can’t reform my way of life, which I would scorn to do in any case, because it doesn’t need reforming. What it comes down to, though, is money. Painting is the only way I can earn enough to give James a decent home and the education he deserves. All I can do is stay out of people’s way.”

They had almost reached Lansdowne Court, thank God. She didn't think she could bear much more of this.

Trick said, "In that case, since you are only here for a few more days, I suggest you consider things from my point of view."

She frowned at him suspiciously. "Judging by what David told me of you, I should expect some kind of trick, but go ahead."

"My days of playing tricks are past, I'm afraid. Here it is, then. People will think badly of you regardless. Agreed?"

Cautiously she nodded.

"Therefore, since your reputation is already ruined, I wish you to consider mine."

"Yours?"

"Mine. I am faced with three options. One, I can snub you and refuse to allow James to play with Lucy. Fortunately I cannot bring myself to do anything so despicable. Two, I can tiptoe around the situation, pretend that I allow James to play with my daughter only because of Lord Lansdowne's tyranny and avoid you as much as possible, making it plain to one and all that I am ashamed of my old friend's widow and her son. Since I do not choose to play the coward or the hypocrite, I refuse to consider this option."

No tricks, eh?

"Three, I can treat you as I would any gently-bred widow of a much-loved friend, especially one whose

company I enjoy, whose esteem I value, whose courage I admire—”

“Oh, stop being foolish! You’re not concerned about your reputation. You merely intend to please yourself.”

Trick steered the gig slowly toward the stables. Softly he said, “Yes, but I am far more interested in pleasing *you*.”

She felt herself flushing like a young girl.

“Do you still mean to allow me to do so?” Trick said.

She looked surprised. “Of course!”

“That’s a relief,” Trick said. “I’ve been kicking myself for making you wait.”

A groom came out to take charge of the gig, and Trick hopped down. He put out a hand, helped her descend and took her cloak bag. She tried to protest, but he ushered her willy-nilly into the house through a side door.

“Well?” His eyes were hot and wicked. “Will you come?”

Yes. Absolutely. As wantonly as you please.

Heavens knew which servants might be listening. She hissed, “For heaven’s sake, Trick—”

“To my house.” He grinned down at her. “To eat.”

She fought down a wave of dizzying heat. A maidservant with a broom and dustpan was coming down the corridor toward them. “Very well, but only because it would do James a great deal of good to hear

about his father from someone besides me. Now, give me my bag and let me get to work.”

He handed her the cloak bag. The maid curtsied and hurried past. When the girl was out of earshot, Trick said, low and full of promise, “I’ll come and get you.”

“And take me where?” Her concern was feeble at best. Desire had taken over, sweeping away the anger and misery that had kept her awake half the night.

“Don’t worry, no one will find us. I know this house very, very well.”

His voice made her shiver. “Hurry. Please.”

He laughed. “Until later, then.”

She wanted him, and wanted him now. “How much later?”

His eyes darkened. “As soon as possible. I have a few small matters to deal with.” He smiled. “Enjoy the wait.”

Oh, I will.

She was almost to the end of the corridor when something made her turn. Trick stood where she had left him, watching her with an expression of such tenderness that she was shaken to the core.

He nodded and walked back the way he had come.

He’d better not be falling in love with her.

No, she had probably mistaken his expression. Wishful thinking, perhaps. What woman didn’t want to be loved? But even if Patrick would consider marrying her, which was impossible, she couldn’t afford an impoverished man. And money wasn’t the only problem. She and David had done exactly as they

pleased, ignoring convention, thoughtless of consequences. They'd been such fools...

She shook off those fruitless thoughts, making her way to the ballroom with a businesslike step, and changed into her smock. After an hour of getting nowhere, she gave up. She couldn't even concentrate on an anvil.

She didn't want to paint that anvil. She wanted those lovers to endure forever.

Sighing, she laid her brush and palette down.

She'd forgotten to ask Trick how he'd entered the ballroom the day before. There must be a hidden door, but it shouldn't be difficult to find. That would give her something to think about besides bedding Trick.

One long wall had windows between the panels, and the other, with mirrors between the panels instead, backed onto a corridor. Trick couldn't have walked the entire length of the ballroom unnoticed, so it must be on the end with the dais and the peepholes. She'd seen every panel on that wall up close.... The peephole wall boasted two gilt-framed mirrors on either side of the dais. She hadn't looked at them closely.

She ran her eyes and fingers up and down the moldings that framed the mirrors, finding nothing that seemed remotely like a catch. Maybe the door wasn't accessible from this side.

"I suppose voyeurs wouldn't want to get caught in the act," she said to herself. "Of watching the act."

"But the host of the orgy might wish to expose them exposing themselves," replied an amused voice.

Trick's arms came around her from behind. She melted against him with a groan. "Trick, how did you—"

"Look up."

She followed his gaze. A semicircular iron curtain rod hung from the ceiling high above. The long curtains, used to cloak the dais when it had been used as a stage for whatever orgiastic entertainments Lord Lansdowne had offered, were pulled back and secured against the corners of the room. Irritably she asked, "At what?"

She was far more interested in what his hands were doing. One hand cupped her left breast, while the other brushed her right nipple through the linen smock. His lips found her exposed throat. "There's nothing worth seeing up there."

She huffed, squirming, but he held her still. "Not anymore, that is." He pressed a hot kiss a little higher up. "Back in the old days, metal hooks on two long poles were used to pull the curtain rod down, which in turn pulled the three central panels up to reveal the room behind them." Another kiss, just under her ear. "The frames of those mirrors are now nailed over the joins, which is why you didn't see them."

He blew in her ear and followed it with his tongue. The bulge of his erection nudged at her derriere. She quivered, needing to touch him.

"Not yet. Don't you want to know how I got in?"

"You're not in yet, Trick."

"Come, then."

"I will, if you'll only *let* me," she said, but he was already leading her to a slim panel between the last window and the curtain secured in the corner. This was the only panel she hadn't touched, because no naked people disported themselves on it. It was a painting of an arched doorway through which one viewed an idyllic pastoral scene.

He had left it ajar just enough to slip his fingers behind the wood and pull it open.

"A picture of a door," she said disgusted. "Could it possibly be more obvious? But I've never seen a secret room in an outside wall."

"It was a priest's hole within a priest's hole." Trick motioned her through the narrow entrance. "If the Roundheads found the outer hole, which is now the room with the peepholes, the priest backed into this one, and if he was lucky, he escaped through the ballroom. It can't be opened from the ballroom side, and the entrance is all but invisible from the other end."

He pulled the panel to, and thick darkness enveloped them. "Dear me," he said. "We'll have to do it all by feel."

He pressed her against the wall, but she didn't melt against him as he expected. She attacked, one hand clutching his hair and pulling his mouth to hers, the other flicking open the buttons of his breeches. She took him in her hand, not gently, and he groaned with

the pleasure of it, but if he didn't slow her down he'd come then and there.

He nuzzled her neck, inhaling deeply of her scent, and took hold of her buttocks through the smock. He separated the cheeks gently, trickling his fingers down the join of her behind.

She let go of him. "Take the damned smock off! I want you touching *me*."

He bunched the fabric in his fists and hauled it over her head. She had a shift on underneath. He bent to lave her breasts through the thin cloth, and she quivered and quaked. He pushed the shift above her waist and slid a hand between her legs.

Ah. He ran his tongue down her belly and lower still.

"Another time," she snarled. She pulled hard on his hair. "I want you inside me."

What a tigress. "What's your hurry?" He wanted to take his time, to explore every inch of her.

"Don't argue with me. Come on, Trick, *please*. I *need* this."

He'd never been begged before except in play. This sounded like something else: bone-deep longing. He cupped her buttocks, lifted her and pressed her against the wall. She was right there, guiding him inside.

Oh, so hot.

She let out a long, deep moan. "Thank you," she whispered.

He kissed her hard and ground into her with a slow, steady stroke.

It was too good to last. Far too soon, she convulsed around him, and convulsed again, and then he came, too, shooting his seed inside her. She slumped against the wall, letting her head fall back against the wood, and he withdrew, letting her down slowly onto her tiptoes, onto her own two feet.

She was so alone. An overwhelming urge to weep slammed into her, and she gave a tiny sob.

Trick pulled her into his arms. His heart pounded and his chest heaved against hers. Different rhythms, different lives, with paths that must part. Tears welled up, and she bit her lip to stop the shaking.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Trick asked,

She shook her head. She must not cry.

“I should have pulled out.”

She shook her head again, and tears threatened anew. If she conceived, she would carry a part of Trick away with her forever.

That should make her happy, but instead she wanted to weep.

His voice was rueful. “I meant to, but I’d envisioned something a little more controlled. A lady on a bed, not a tigress against a wall.”

“It doesn’t matter.” It did, but not the way he thought.

“No, probably not,” he said. “The chances of conceiving from any one coupling are relatively small. I’ll pull out next time.”

She shook her head again. "No. Don't." If she didn't conceive, she'd have nothing of him to take with her.

If she did, her ruin would be even more complete and utter than it already was.

She found she didn't care. She'd long since lost any claim to respectability, so why bother? She'd far rather have some part of Trick than the illusion of being respectable that she'd tended for years. She was sick to death of painting nudes, but she'd do it until she became blind and palsied, if she had no choice.

Next time, he'd said. She asked, "What bed?"

He laughed. "You are a joy and a delight." He kissed her again, gently, sweetly, so tenderly it terrified her. What if he really was falling in love with her? For too many reasons, it would never do.

He said, "Stay here, and I'll open the door to the peephole room."

She fished about in the dark for her smock. If she were sensible, she would put it on. She would apologize to Trick and go out the other way. She would paint the horrid anvil and go home before she fell in love, too.

She'd never had much sense.

A second or two later, a widening slit of light showed ahead. She followed Trick into the old priest's hole, a long windowless room barely wide enough for a bed.

She stopped in the doorway, taking it all in. Candles in wall sconces lit the room. On the floor lay a

mattress, neatly made up with sheets and a coverlet. Pillows were piled on top. A chair and a tray table with a jug, a bowl and a small pile of hand towels stood before a screen at the far end of the room. Next to the screen was a door. By the head of the bed a small round table with an embroidered cloth held two glasses, a corkscrew, a bottle of wine and a bouquet of lilacs. Their fragrance bathed the tiny room.

“How *could* you?”

He looked completely bewildered. “How could I what?”

Just like David—a dear, heedless, uncomprehending male.

“When I said my reputation was ruined, I didn’t mean feel free to make it worse! Now that you’ve brought servants into this, everyone will know you’re bedding me. The whole household might as well come and watch.”

“What servants?” He was amused now, blast him, and terribly pleased with himself.

“You prepared all this yourself?”

He reached for her with a sweet, wicked grin. “What do you think I’ve been doing for the past hour?”

She didn’t move. Why didn’t he understand? “You brought everything in here, and no one saw you?”

“I don’t think so. If I’d involved the servants, I would have had a maid make the bed.” He surveyed his work fondly. “I didn’t do such a bad job.”

“You couldn’t possibly have done all this without being seen.”

“Why not? This wing of the house is generally deserted.” He removed the smock from her grasp and dropped it onto the floor. His eyes ran over her almost-naked form with vast satisfaction.

She turned and walked away. “Yes, but you must have gone elsewhere for the linens and the wine.”

“Trust me, I know this house and its servants very well. No one would question my actions, even if they did see me.”

She reached the screen at the end of the room. As expected, it concealed a chamber pot. She turned to dip her fingers in the water jug. Warm water. He’d thought of everything except what mattered most. “They’ll all be saying I’m your whore.”

He’d been moving slowly her way, but at this he stopped. “If I hear even a hint of such a thing, the offenders will be dismissed.” So stern, as if he were lord of the manor instead of a mere steward.

She glared at him, hands on hips. “Oh, come now. You can’t dismiss Lord Lansdowne’s servants at will. He’s been fairly decent to me, but he won’t care about my reputation one way or the other. In fact, he’ll probably dismiss *you* if he finds out what we’re doing. You haven’t done a stitch of work for him this morning, have you?”

“Eliza,” Trick said, “you’re beginning to annoy me.”

“You may not have noticed it,” she countered, “but you’re having the same effect on me.” She stalked past him to retrieve her smock, but she didn’t put it on. She couldn’t just walk out, not after all he’d done, after what they’d just done together. Thinking of it made her simmer and sizzle for more.

She shouldn’t think of it, then. She clutched the smock to her belly, unable to leave or to decide to stay.

Trick said, “Can’t you trust me to know my obligations and also to have a care for you?”

“No,” she cried, “I can’t!”

She might as well have slapped him. She could see she’d wounded his pride. She didn’t blame him; she had her own tattered pride. He folded his arms and propped himself against the wall, lips compressed.

He deserved an explanation. “Look what David did! We were young and careless of consequences, but he should never have asked me to paint the mistress of one of his friends, and then another and another. I’m not saying it’s all his fault—I have always been fascinated by lust, and the subjects intrigued me—but we both should have known better. To top one folly with another, David squandered his fortune on unprofitable investments. And then he died, condemning me to a lifetime of painting whores.”

“You no longer want to paint nudes?”

“No, they bore me to tears.” She’d had no chance to explore the Sussex countryside, with its long, lovely slopes and sweeping skies. They were close to the ocean, too. She’d wanted to take James down to the

seaside just before they left, let him play on the shore while she sketched.

But it was not to be.

She paused. "So no, Trick, much as I like you, I cannot allow myself to trust you. I have to fend for myself."

"Not when you're with me."

She gave up then; he didn't understand, but he was here and so was she, and by the look of him, he still wanted her as much as she wanted him.

They couldn't afford to argue. In a few days she would leave.

She dropped the smock and pulled the shift over her head. "We don't have much time."

His voice was rough, his eyes intent as they roamed her nakedness. "We have plenty." He took off his shirt.

Oh, he was beautiful, with a dusting of dark hair on his chest, sleek powerful shoulders and well-muscled arms. He unbuttoned his breeches and shucked them, removed his socks and peeled off his smalls. Yes, he was very ready for her again.

She sauntered away from him to the jug of water, dipped the towel and squeezed it out. She put one foot on the chair and bent to clean herself.

"Allow me," Trick said.

He wouldn't let her do a thing. "My turn," he said. "This time, we do it my way."

He washed her with long, slow strokes until she was out of her mind with urgency. "Please," she said. "I need you inside me. Now."

“Too bad,” Trick said, pushing her onto the bed. “I like to savor every moment.” And savor it he did, tormenting her with lips and teeth and tongue, bringing her from yearning to climax to languor and back again. Finally he parted her legs and entered her.

She gripped his buttocks and thrust eagerly back at him, desperate now.

Again, he took his time, watching her with every move. She closed her eyes and seethed toward him. He allowed it for a stroke or two, and then slowed again.

She opened her eyes. His were already open; always open, always watching. She closed her eyes again and tried to fly away, but her eyelids wouldn’t obey. Couldn’t obey.

She moaned and tried to turn, but he locked her eyes to his. She whimpered; it was unbearable. “Don’t look at me like that,” she gasped.

“Like what?” He slid slowly out of her and in again.

“Like...” She groaned. She didn’t want this. She couldn’t have this.

“Like what?” His voice and his thrusts insisted on the truth.

“Please... Stop it, Trick. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Tell me. How do I look at you?”

She turned her head from side to side, but there was no escape. The anvil wouldn’t work; she knew it now. She’d have to leave immediately. Someone else could cover that last panel, but not she. She couldn’t paint love out of the picture.

He thrust again. A strangled wail, of anguish or pleasure, burst from Eliza.

He whispered in her ear. "Will you tell me, or shall I tell you?"

No! She couldn't let him; he'd say it in the heat of passion and afterward regret it.

As if you love me. But he was thrusting hard now, and she couldn't get the words out, could do nothing but give herself up to him, heart and soul.

"I love you, Eliza," he said, when their breathing had returned to normal. "Will you marry me?"

She lay very still under him. He tried to catch her eyes again, but she pushed him gently off and sat up. "I love you, too, Trick." Her voice didn't sound like one lover to another, but rather like a parent to a child. "But love, intoxicating as it is, cannot be relied upon for food and clothing."

He had more than enough to support a family. A large one, in luxury, for several lifetimes. "Money isn't a problem," he said.

She stood jerkily and drew the shift and smock over her head. "That reminds me," she said. "I need to get paid. Thank you, Trick. This has been wonderful, but it could never have been more than a brief affair, and we both know it." She took a candle from the sconce, walked into the priest's escape hole and out of his life.

For a minute he lay there, naked and stunned. But he couldn't afford to stay stunned for long. This could

only mean one thing: she intended to leave the Court now.

He dressed rapidly and went out of the other door, through the unused chamber on the far side and to the opposite wing to see Uncle Lionel.

Lord Lansdowne was having one of his bad days. He lay back on his pillows, covered all the way up to his chin. His eyes were closed.

"When she comes to you for payment," he told his great-uncle, "send her to me."

The old lord's eyes popped open, flashing with indignation. "If she'll only do it for money, it's your problem. I made a bargain with her, and I intend to keep it. By God, you young people have no principles, and yet you accuse me of being immoral!"

Must everyone jump to conclusions? "Did I say anything about not paying her? I need an opportunity to speak to her, and she's in a stubborn mood." He walked to the window and turned. "I intend to marry her."

Uncle Lionel thrust himself to a sitting position. "You? And the Dauntry?"

"Do you have an objection?" He couldn't keep a note of challenge from his voice.

The old lord tossed off the covers with unexpected vigor. "You've finally found yourself a real woman, you lucky dog. If I were but *five* years younger, I'd steal a march on you and take her myself." He rang violently for his valet. "What happened to the society misses you were courting?"

They would have taught Lucy to be everything I despise.

Patrick didn't feel like admitting he'd almost consigned his daughter to the care of one of several vain, selfish hypocrites. That he'd lectured Eliza on standing firm in her beliefs while he had almost acted contrary to his own. "Amanda wouldn't have approved of them." He grinned. "Uncle, I've got to take care of a few small matters. Reassure Mrs. Dauntry as to my situation and prospects, will you? I shan't be long."

Eliza had never seen the old lord so animated, but he'd jumped to entirely the wrong conclusions.

"Patrick says you're to be married. I couldn't be happier, my dear, unless you were marrying me instead."

He moved from one panel to the next, inspecting the paintings carefully one by tedious one, tapping his cane on the floorboards.

She didn't have time for this. He'd seen most of them already. She still hadn't decided how to explain the one panel she hadn't done.

"It's very flattering of Patrick to offer for me, but he must think it over first." By the time he had done so, she'd be long gone. "I'm not at all what his daughter needs. I'm never shocked when I should be, and I'll never be free of scandal."

Tap. Tap. "What if little Lucy takes after her mother? She'll need a female who understands the

pros and cons of being a wild one. If, God forbid, she turns into a snippety little miss, there are plenty of old biddies in the family to help out." Tap. Tap. *Tap*. "You'd be a fool not to snap my nephew up while he's hot for you. He's quite well-off now, but as my heir, he'll be a very wealthy man before long."

She frowned. *Your heir?* "He's your nephew? I didn't know."

"Great-nephew." He poked one of the pigs in the behind. "Ha, I hadn't noticed that before. She looks a lot like Mrs. Dent."

Eliza could hardly summon a twist of the lips. She rather regretted that unladylike fit of spite.

"You're a clever lass. Your news should put a dent in *her*, I daresay."

Eliza shrugged unhappily. For all she knew, Patrick's eventual wife would be bosom bows with Mrs. Dent. She should probably repaint that one pig, but there was no time.

Why must Lord Lansdowne be in such a chatty mood? Couldn't he just pay her and let her go?

"There's no one to inherit the title and no entail, so everything goes to Patrick. He's a damned good catch."

So money really wasn't a problem.

"After Amanda died, he moved to Sussex to learn how to run the estate. It was his notion to have those panels painted so he could marry a decent woman and bring his family to live at the Court." Lord Lansdowne

cackled. "But I chose the artist, and he's getting an indecent woman instead. Couldn't be better."

It couldn't be worse. She loved Trick, and Trick loved her, and he wasn't a wastrel, and she'd do an excellent job of mothering Lucy, but...

The old lord rapped his cane loudly upon the floor. "What about this panel? Trying to skip out without finishing the job?"

"I—" *Oh, to hell with it. Tell him the truth.* "I couldn't bring myself to alter that one, Lord Lansdowne. I like it too much as is."

He jabbed the lovers with his stick. "Looks like they're enjoying each other, don't they?"

"I'll discount my price, of course, and if you'd like me to find someone else to paint over it..."

"Bah!" he said. "We'll find a way to cover it temporarily until you decide what to do. We could even remove that panel and replace it. You and Patrick could keep the original somewhere rather more private, eh?"

"Lord Lansdowne, I really don't think—"

For the first time since he had met Eliza, Patrick entered the ballroom in the ordinary way. "There you are, Uncle Lionel," he said. "Your valet says it's time for your cordial." He stood holding the door wide.

Lord Lansdowne tapped slowly across the floor. "Getting rid of me? I don't blame you, you young dog." He disappeared into the care of his valet.

This wasn't going to be easy. Patrick had been standing in the open doorway for a few minutes. Eliza didn't seem anywhere near as overjoyed at his financial stability as he had anticipated.

What could be eating at her now?

He shut the door and came forward. "Well, Eliza? I couldn't give you a whole day to think it over, as you did me, but it's time to make up your mind."

She clasped those rough, competent hands together until the knuckles were white. "Trick, it's very kind of you, but I can't marry you."

"Why not? You're just the stepmother Amanda would have wanted for Lucy, and I think David would be reasonably pleased to have me care for his son."

"Yes, yes, he would, but—"

"You won't have to worry about money, you won't be subjected to unwanted advances and you won't have to paint boring nudes."

She had gone wan with distress. What was he saying wrong?

"Would you like to try your hand at seascapes?" he said. "We can take a little jaunt down to the shore. It might be chilly yet for painting, but we can take the children for a run along the beach and dine at a seaside inn. What do you say?"

"Trick, don't." She put up her hands. "Don't touch me, please. I won't be able to—"

He put his arms around her. "Won't be able to refuse me? Excellent. That's exactly as it should be."

"I *must* refuse you." One day Eliza's past would come back to harm them, and Trick would hate it as much as she, and James and Lucy would suffer shame for no fault of their own. She wanted to weep and wail at the unfairness of it all, but what was the point? She had to be strong and carry on.

She pressed her hands to his chest and pushed away, but he held her tight. "I'm not letting you go unless you give me a reason that makes sense. As far as I can see, nothing could be more perfect than you and me."

Perfect, and impossible.

"I've sent for a special license, and I'm having my lawyers draft a settlement. Your future will be assured, regardless of what happens to me."

She swallowed. She hated having to confess her own stupidity. "There's something you don't know, Trick. I painted a self-portrait for David. It's—it's a nude, and quite lewd, and..." She flushed for shame. "After he died and I found out how dire our circumstances were, it was all I could do to escape with valuables I could sell—his jewelry and mine, and a few other items. By the time I remembered the self-portrait, they'd taken the house and everything in it, and I'd gone into hiding with James for fear they would seize the clothes off our backs."

"Oh, my poor darling," Trick said. "But you needn't worry, because—"

"Let me finish!" She was fierce with the need to get this over with. "We managed to get by, and I started

painting again. I've done reasonably well, but the self-portrait never came up for auction. Someone purchased it privately. It hasn't surfaced, but it may at any time if the owner dies or sells it to someone who doesn't keep it to himself." She shivered. "I can live with the idea of one man looking at it, but the whole world... Sooner or later it will ruin James's life. I can't let it destroy you and Lucy as well."

"Darling, I—"

"I've stopped lying awake at night agonizing about it, but it would be far, far worse with your daughter to worry about. And we'd probably have more children, which would mean even more ruined lives."

She pushed again, hard. He must finally have seen sense, for this time he let her go.

How could he have been so thoughtless? Years and years she'd suffered over nothing.

He could relieve her anxiety, but would she ever speak to him again?

He wouldn't give her a choice. "If I return the portrait to you, do you promise to marry me?"

"How can you possibly find it? You can't advertise for it, and—"

"Yes or no, Eliza." Even as he tried it, he knew this last trick might not pay off. "Yes or no."

"Of course, but—" She flapped a hand. "Yes, I'll marry you if you get the damned thing back."

“Wait here.” He went into the corridor and returned a moment later with a large, rectangular packet wrapped in brown paper. Mutely he handed it to her.

She attacked it, ripping the paper apart until the whole astonishing painting lay revealed. “How did you find it?” She knelt before it, running her fingers over it, caressing it like a long-lost child.

He said nothing. She looked up, and slowly, comprehension settled into her eyes. “*You* were the purchaser? *You’ve* had it all this time?”

“I’m sorry, Eliza.” *And* he was sorry. He’d been such a selfish fool. Not at first, but... Best get it over with. “David told me about the portrait one night in his cups, and I knew neither he nor you would want it to become public. I coerced the auction house into selling it to me privately.”

Her lip trembled. A gut-wrenching tear rolled down her cheek.

He was babbling now. “At first, I tried to locate you, but you were nowhere to be found. I put the portrait in an attic, and not too long after that Amanda was killed. I didn’t find it again until a few months ago, when I started thinking seriously of remarrying. I knew by then that you had resurfaced, and I thought about returning it, but I’m a selfish fellow. I wanted to keep it for myself.”

Thank God. Thank God.

She shut her eyes. Tears welled up from under her lids and ran unheeded down her cheeks.

Trick dropped to his knees beside her. "Can you forgive me, my love?"

"Oh, Trick, you wonderful man." She flung her arms around him, and together they toppled slowly to the floor. It was cold and hard and welcoming.

She clung to him, weeping with relief and joy. "You've taken care of me for years."

"And I intend to do so for years to come." He kissed her. "Stop crying. We'll be married in the village church on Sunday, and James will sing for us."

She buried her face in his chest, hiding her tears as well.

Later, she looked ruefully at her self-portrait before Trick wrapped it up again. "Do you really like it? Unfortunately it's the real Eliza."

"I know." His eyes were hot and wicked. "And the real Eliza belongs to me."

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Notorious Eliza

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