

BEAUTY, BEAST and BELLADONNA

Beware of allowing yourself to be prejudiced by appearances. –Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, “Beauty and the Beast” (1756)

1

The day had arrived. Miss Ophelia Flax’s last day in Paris, her last day in Artemis Stunt’s gilt-edged apartment choked with woody perfumes and cigarette haze. Ophelia had chosen December 12th, 1867, at eleven o’clock in the morning as the precise time she would make a clean breast of it. And now it was half past ten.

Ophelia swept aside brocade curtains and shoved a window open. Rain spattered her face. She leaned out and squinted up the street. Boulevard Saint-Michel was a valley of stone buildings with iron balconies and steep slate roofs. Beyond carriages and bobbling umbrellas, a horse-drawn omnibus splashed closer.

“Time to go,” she said, and latched the window shut. She turned. “Good-bye, Henrietta. You will write to me—telegraph me, even—if Prue changes her mind about the convent?”

“Of course, darling.” Henrietta Bright sat at the vanity table, still in her frothy dressing gown. “But where shall I send a letter?” She shrugged a half-bare shoulder in the looking glass. Reassuring herself, no doubt, that at forty-odd years of age she was still just as dazzling as the New York theater critics used to say.

“I’ll let the clerk at Howard DeLuxe’s Varieties know my forwarding address,” Ophelia said. “Once I have one.” She pulled on cheap gloves with twice-darned fingertips.

“What will you *do* in New England?” Henrietta asked. “Besides getting buried under snowdrifts and puritans? I’ve been to Boston. The entire city is like a mortuary. No drinking on Sundays, either.” She sipped her glass of poison-green cordial. “Although, all that knuckle-rapping *does* make the gentlemen more generous with actresses like us when they get the chance.”

“Actresses like us?” Ophelia went to her carpetbag, packed and ready on the opulent bed that might’ve suited the Princess on the Pea. Ladies born and raised on New Hampshire farmsteads did not sleep in such beds. Not without prickles of guilt, at least. “I’m no longer an actress, Henrietta. Neither are you.” And they were *never* the same kind of actress. Or so Ophelia fervently wished to believe.

“No? Then what precisely do you call tricking the Count Griffe into believing you are a wealthy soap heiress from Cleveland, Ohio? Sunday school lessons?”

“I had to do it.” Ophelia dug in her carpetbag and pulled out a bonnet with crusty patches of glue where ribbon flowers once had been. She clamped it on her head. “I’m calling upon the Count Griffe at eleven o’clock, on my way to the steamship ticket office. I told you. He scarpered to England so soon after his proposal, I never had a chance to confess. He’s in Paris only today before he goes to his country château, so today is my last chance to tell him everything.”

“It’s horribly selfish of you not to wait two more weeks, Ophelia—two measly weeks.”

Not this old song and dance again. "Wait two more weeks so that you might accompany me to the hunting party at Griffé's château? Stand around and twiddle my thumbs for two whole weeks while you hornswoggle some poor old gent into marrying you? Money and love don't mix, you know."

"What? They mix beautifully. And not hornswoggle, darling. Seduce. And Mr. Larsen isn't a *poor* gentleman. He's as rich as Midas. Artemis confirmed as much."

"You know what I meant. Helpless."

"Mr. Larsen is a widower, yes." Henrietta smiled. "Deliciously helpless."

"I must go now, Henrietta. Best of luck to you."

"I'm certain Artemis would loan you her carriage—oh, wait. Principled Miss Ophelia Flax must forge her own path. Miss Ophelia Flax *never* accepts hand-outs or—"

"Artemis has been ever so kind, allowing me to stay here the last three weeks, and I couldn't impose any more." Artemis Stunt was Henrietta's friend, a wealthy lady authoress. "I'll miss my omnibus." Ophelia pawed through the carpetbag, past her battered theatrical case and a patched petticoat, and drew out a small box. The box, shiny black with painted roses, had been a twenty-sixth birthday gift from Henrietta last week. It was richer than the rest of Ophelia's possessions by miles, but it served a purpose: a place to hide her little nest egg.

The omnibus fare, she well knew from her month in Paris, was thirty centimes. She opened the box. Her lungs emptied like a bellows. A slip of paper curled around the ruby ring Griffé had given her. But her money—all of her hard-won money she'd scraped together working as a lady's maid in Germany a few months back—was gone. *Gone*.

She swung toward Henrietta. "Where did you hide it?"

"Hide what?"

"My money!"

"Scowling like that will only give you wrinkles."

"I don't even have enough for the omnibus fare now." Ophelia's plans suddenly seemed vaporously fragile. "Now isn't the time for jests, Henrietta. I must get to Griffé's house so I might go to the steamship ticket office before it closes, and then on to the train station. The Cherbourg-New York ship leaves only once a fortnight."

"Why don't you simply keep that ring? You'll be in the middle of the Atlantic before he even knows you've gone. If it's a farm you desire, why, that ring will pay for five farms and two hundred cows."

Ophelia wasn't the smelling salts kind of lady, but her fingers shook as she replaced the box's lid. "Never. I would *never* steal this ring—"

"He gave it to you. It wouldn't be stealing."

"—and I will never, ever become. . . ." Ophelia pressed her lips together.

"Become like *me*, darling?"

If Ophelia fleeced rich fellows to pay her way instead of working like honest folks, then she couldn't live with herself. What would become of her? Would she find herself at forty in dressing gowns at midday and absinthe on her breath?

"You must realize I didn't take your money, Ophelia. I've got my sights set rather higher than your pitiful little field mouse hoard. But I see how unhappy you are, so I'll make you an offer."

Ophelia knew the animal glint in Henrietta's whiskey-colored eyes. "You wish to pay to accompany me to Griffé's hunting party so that you might pursue Mr. Larsen. Is that it?"

"Clever girl. You ought to set yourself up in a tent with a crystal ball. Yes. I'll pay you whatever it was the servants stole—and I've no doubt it was one of those horrid Spanish maids that Artemis hired who pinched your money. Only keep up the Cleveland soap heiress ruse for two weeks longer, Ophelia, until I hook that Norwegian fish."

Ophelia pictured the green fields and white-painted buildings of rural New England, and her throat ached with frustration. The trouble was, it was awfully difficult to forge your own path when you were always flat broke. "Pay me double or nothing," she said.

"Deal. Forthwith will be *so* pleased."

"*Forthwith?*" Ophelia frowned. "Forthwith Golden, conjurer of the stage? Do you mean to say *he'll* be tagging along with us?"

"Mm." Henrietta leaned close to the mirror and picked something from her teeth with her little fingernail. "He's ever so keen for a jaunt in the country, and he adores blasting at beasts with guns."

Saints preserve us.

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Ophelia meant to cling to her purpose like a barnacle to a rock. It wasn't easy. Simply gritting her teeth and *enduring* the next two weeks was not really her way. But Henrietta had her up a stump.

First, there had been the two-day flurry of activity in Artemis Stunt's apartment, getting a wardrobe ready for Ophelia to play the part of a fashionable heiress at a hunting party. Artemis was over fifty years of age but, luckily, a bohemian and so with youthful tastes in clothing. She was also tall, beanstalkish and large-footed, just like Ophelia, and very enthusiastic about the entire deception. "It would make a marvelous novelette, I think," she said to Ophelia. But this was exactly what Ophelia wished to avoid: behaving like a ninny in a novelette.

And now, this interminable journey.

"Where are we now?" Henrietta, bundled in furs, stared dully out the coach window. "The sixth tier of hell?"

Ophelia consulted the Baedeker on her knees, opened to a map of the Périgord region. "Almost there."

"*There* being the French version of the Middle of Nowhere," Forthwith Golden said, propping his boots on the seat next to Henrietta. "Why do these Europeans insist upon living in these Godforsaken pockets? What's wrong with Paris, anyway?"

"You said you missed the country air." Henrietta shoved his boots off the seat.

"Did I?" Forthwith had now and then performed conjuring tricks in Howard DeLuxe's Varieties back in New York, so Ophelia knew more of him than she cared to. He was dark-haired, too handsome, and skilled at making things disappear. Especially money.

"You insisted upon coming along," Henrietta said to Forthwith, "and don't try to deny it."

"Ah, yes, but Henny, you neglected to tell me that your purpose for this hunting excursion was to ensnare some doddering old corpse into matrimony. I've seen that performance of yours a dozen times, precious, and it's gotten a bit boring."

"Oh, do shut up. You're only envious because you spent your last penny on hair pomade."

"I hoped you'd notice. Does Mr. Larsen have any hair at all? Or does he attempt to fool the world by combing two long hairs over a liver-spotted dome?"

"He's an avid sportsman, Artemis says, and a crack shot. So I'd watch my tongue if I were you."

"Oh dear God. A codger with a shotgun."

"He wishes to go hunting in the American West. Shoot buffalos from the train and all that."

"One of those Continentals who have glamorized the whole Westward Ho business, not realizing that it's all freezing to death and eating Aunt Emily's thighbone in the mountains?"

Ophelia sighed. Oh, for a couple wads of cotton wool to stop up her ears. Henrietta and Forthwith had been bickering for the entire journey, first in the train compartment between Paris and Limoges and then, since there wasn't a train station within 50 miles of Château Vézère, in this bone-rattling coach. Outside, hills, hills, and more hills. Bare, scrubby trees and meandering vineyards. Farmhouses of sulphurous yellow stone.

A tiny orange sun sank over a murky river. Each time a draft swept through the coach, Ophelia tasted the minerals that foretold snow.

"Ophelia," Forthwith said, nudging her.

"What is it?"

Forthwith made series of fluid motions with his hands, and a green and yellow parakeet fluttered out of his cuff and landed on his finger.

"That's horrible. How long has that critter been stuffed up your sleeve?"

Ophelia poked out a finger and the parakeet hopped on. Feathers tufted on the side of its head and its eyes were possibly glazed. It was hard to say with a parakeet. "Poor thing."

"It hasn't got feelings, silly." Forthwith yawned.

"*Finally*," Henrietta said, sitting up straighter. "We've arrived."

The coach passed through ornate gates. Naked trees cast shadows across a long avenue. They clattered to a stop before the huge front door. Château Vézère was three stories, rectangular, and built of yellow stone, with six chimneys, white-painted shutters, and dozens of tall, glimmering windows. Bare black vegetation encroached on either side, and Ophelia saw some smaller stone buildings to the side.

"Looks like a costly doll's house," Henrietta said.

"I rather thought it looked like a mental asylum," Forthwith said.

Ophelia slid Griffé's ruby ring on her hand, the hand that wasn't holding a parakeet. Someone swung the coach door open.

"Let the show begin, darlings," Henrietta murmured.

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A footman in green livery helped Ophelia down first. Garon Gavage, the Count Griffé, bounded forward to greet her. "Mademoiselle Stonewall, I have been restless, sleepless, in anticipation of your arrival—ah, how *belle* you look." His dark gold mane of hair wafted in the breeze. "How I have longed for your presence—what is this? A *petit* bird?"

"What? Oh. Yes." Ophelia couldn't even begin to explain the parakeet. "It's very nice to see you, Count. How long has it been? Three weeks?"

Griffé's burly chest rose and fell. "Nineteen days, twenty hours, and thirty-two minutes."

Right.

Forthwith was out of the coach and pumping Griffé's hand. "Count Griffé," he said with a toothy white smile, "pleased to meet you. My sister has told me all about you."

Ophelia's belly lurched.

"Sister?" Griffé knit his brow.

"I beg your pardon," Forthwith said. "I'm Forthwith Stonewall, Ophelia's brother. Didn't my sister tell you I was coming along?"

The *rat*.

"Ah!" Griffé clapped Forthwith on the shoulder. "Monsieur Stonewall. Perhaps your sister did mention it—I have been most distracted by business matters in England, *très* forgetful . . . And who is this?" Griffé nodded to Henrietta as she stepped down from the coach. "Another delightful American relation, eh?"

It had *better* not be. Ophelia said, "This is—"

"Mrs. Henrietta Brighton," Henrietta said quickly, and then gave a sad smile.

Precisely when had Miss Henrietta Bright become *Mrs.* Henrietta Brighton? And . . . oh, merciful heavens. How could Ophelia have been so blind? Henrietta was in black. *All* in black.

"Did Miss Stonewall neglect to mention that I would chaperone her on this visit?" Henrietta asked Griffé. "I am a dear friend of the Stonewall family, and I have been on a Grand Tour in order to take my mind away from my poor darling—darling . . . *oh*." She dabbed her eyes with a hankie.

Griffé took Henrietta's arm and patted it as he led her through the front door. "A widow, *oui*? My most profound condolences, Madame Brighton. You are very welcome here."

Ophelia and Forthwith followed. The parakeet's feet clung to Ophelia's finger, and tiny snowflakes fell from the darkening sky.

"You're *shameless*," Ophelia said to Forthwith in a hot whisper.

Forthwith grinned. "Aren't I, though?"