

The Duke's Willful Wife

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e-book ISBN13: 9781940134109

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Chapter 1

Sasha picked up the paintbrush, her fingers shaking and her stomach churning with fear and anticipation. "I'm over him," she whispered out loud, ignoring the cold mist that showed her breath as she took the step closer to the canvas. Dipping her brush into the first color, she braced herself and started the process, the first colors hitting the white canvas no longer a shock to her mind but still something she didn't particularly enjoy. But since this whole process of painting this particular subject was physically painful for her, she ignored the starting sensation and concentrated on working through to get to the answer.

There was no other way to do it, she told herself, but to dive right in and face the results. Being afraid of the answer wasn't going to solve the problem and she wouldn't know the truth until she started. Procrastinating wouldn't give her the information she desperately needed.

Impatiently, she pushed her long, brown hair out of her way, tucking it up on top of her head with the end of her paint brush, uncaring that a bit of paint smeared across her lovely cheekbone. She wore no makeup, but her soft, brown eyes and peaches and cream complexion were rarely viewed by anyone anymore. She went out each day for a long walk and she occasionally saw the others in the village, but the only daily care she took in her appearance was to remove her paint smock that covered her from neck to knee while she worked. She was unaware, and unconcerned if people questioned her appearance.

At least that was the case over the past year.

Classical music flowed around her as she worked on the painting. She didn't stop for food, didn't notice the light changing as the morning turned to afternoon, nor when the evening faded into night, and neither did she acknowledge the ache in her legs from standing all day. It was almost midnight before she put her paintbrush down and sighed in frustration.

As she looked at the painting, her heart lurched, the truth staring at her from the eyes she'd just painted. The truth was irrevocable and no matter how many times she told herself that she didn't, when she painted his face, she knew she was still in love with her husband.

She sighed with the acceptance that she wasn't yet over the man who had hurt her so deeply that even a year later, she still felt as if a hole had been torn out of her chest. Maintaining a stoic face while she worked, Sasha carefully cleaned her brushes and set them in the appropriate place in their holders to dry out, meticulously ensuring that they were immaculate and ready for her next project.

When she was finished with her supplies, she wearily carried the canvas to the barn behind her tiny cottage and stored it with the others that she'd worked on recently. The paintings here were items she'd either started and hadn't finished because she'd lost the inspiration, or that she didn't want the world to see because they were too personal or not good enough. This one fell into all of those categories so she stacked it towards the back, pulling the heavy tarp over the stack to ensure dust and water didn't get to it, and made sure that the moth balls were in place to deter some of the more curious animals from damaging any of the works. She might not be

ready to sell or get rid of these efforts, but that didn't mean she wanted anything to happen to them.

Back in her cottage, she turned off the music, poured herself a glass of milk for dinner, then climbed into bed without bothering to change. Worn out jeans, flannel, tattered shirt and all, she just needed the warmth of the relative softness of her bed. And the pillows. She pulled them close, hugging one to her chest and the other tucked under her head. Not the same because the pillows didn't emanate the same heat as his arms and chest and they were much too soft compared to his muscles that were more analogous to rocks than anything else, but close enough and they were all she had at the moment, she thought as the tears spilled down her cheeks.

Tomorrow would be better, she promised herself. And she wouldn't try again for another month. Long walks, maybe some different music and a new painting. Her mind went through all the rituals she'd discovered that would help her get through the day. One breath at a time, she sighed into the night. Just one breath, one moment, one step at a time.

The following morning, she forced herself to fix some breakfast and eat it. It was only a soft boiled egg and whole wheat toast, but it was more than she'd eaten the whole previous day. A cup of tea warmed her up and she pulled her sneakers on for her morning walk. She pushed herself harder this time, walking around the pond, through the village, smiling and waving to the people she saw. She'd grown up in this small town so she knew just about everyone, but she didn't socialize a great deal anymore. Ever since Dante and his accusations, his rejection of her, she hadn't felt strong enough to be around other people.

Soon though, she'd start accepting some of the invitations. She needed to get out more, to be with other people and stop acting like a miserable, old recluse. Her activities lately weren't healthy and she needed to rejoin the world, to feel life again even if it might be painful at times. She knew she wasn't ready to start dating again, but she needed to reconnect with her friends, especially her college friends. She missed Kallista and Dana terribly and she knew they worried about her. She e-mailed with them when she remembered to log into her account, but the communication was sporadic. Dana was married with a baby on the way and Kallista was doing well as a journalist. They both had stopped by over the past year to check in on her and she'd done a relatively good job of convincing them that she was okay.

The banging on the door as she stepped through her back access startled her. Since the house was so small, she could see straight through from the back to her front entrance but the solid oak wouldn't allow her to see through and discover who had invaded her space so unexpectedly.

"Sasha! I'm here for the paintings. I know you're here so don't try and pretend otherwise," the male voice said.

Sasha's body relaxed as she released a relieved laugh, then hurried to the front door. "Robert, you know I'd never pretend with you," she said and hugged him enthusiastically. "What are you doing way out here in the country? I told you I'd bring the paintings to you

Monday and I know you abhor leaving your precious city life and risk running into a leaf or, heaven forbid, a bug.”

Sasha’s agent and friend stepped through the front door and took his favorite client into his arms, as much to greet her as to determine if she was taking care of herself. As his arms closed around her slender frame, he became worried that she wasn’t eating well. “I didn’t trust you to be on time and you know that’s a completely justified terror when it comes to you lately. Your sense of timeliness seems to have disappeared completely. Besides, Monday is too far in the future. I need the paintings this weekend.” He surveyed her face, noting the more pronounced cheekbones and prominent, brown eyes still filled with so much loneliness. Damn that man who had done this to her gentle soul! Sasha was one of those sweet, caring people who pushed spiders out of her house instead of stomping on them. How Dante Fuitello could do this to such a beautiful woman was beyond anything Robert could understand.

Sasha pulled away, knowing that Robert would comment on her weight if he felt how much she’d lost in the past few weeks. And since there wasn’t a whole lot to lose in the first place, he wouldn’t be shy about mentioning her health, a subject that he brought up constantly it seemed.

“I thought you had a full gallery.” She pulled him into her house, excited to see him but not sure why he’d come all this way instead of waiting for her to deliver the paintings she’d promised. His comment about being too slow was worrisome, only compounded by the fact that Robert was a city man, completely in tune with the rhythm of London and all the excitement available. He hated coming out to the country where she lived, considering it too “earthy”.

“I did until I sold your last two yesterday.” He looked around the dark, dingy little cottage that had only four rooms, a number that was abhorrently tiny in his estimation. “You’re a wealthy woman and a famous artist now. Why are you still living in this hovel?”

Sasha rolled her eyes at the comment he made about her humble dwelling each time he visited, horrified that anyone would live in a place that doesn’t have hardwood floors and twelve foot ceilings with strategically designed lighting to enhance one’s living space. “I love this hovel. Thank you very much for not disrespecting the hovel.” She moved into the galley style kitchen that was about the size of some people’s closet and put her battered tea kettle on one of the two burners of her ancient stove. With a flick of the lighter, a flame popped up under the kettle.

Robert leaned against the rough, wooden door frame that looked like a termite had rejected it about a hundred years ago. “The condo next to mine is about to go on the market. I can tell my neighbor that you’re interested. Lots of light, plenty of room and it doesn’t smell like turpentine or burnt toast all the time.” He looked around disdainfully. “How in the world do you create such amazing masterpieces in this kind of light?”

Sasha looked away, the memory of the most amazing place she’d ever painted coming to mind. This little cottage was the antithesis of that room with all the windows and natural light, the skylights that let in the sunshine no matter what time of the day.

Unfortunately, with that wonderful room came a not-so-perfect existence. One she had tried, and failed, to endure. "This place is perfect for me. At least for now." She still held out the hope that she'd get over that time in her life and be able to move on.

"I only have three pictures ready for you unfortunately."

Robert rolled his eyes. "Do you have any life outside of painting?" he asked without sarcasm. For an artist of her caliber to produce three paintings in the last month, he suspected that she barely slept and did nothing other than paint. He also knew it was her way of working through her emotions, which had been severely tattered, but maybe if she got out a bit, she might recover more quickly. And for him to want an artist to slow down, which would mean less commissions for his bank account, that was genuine concern as Robert never really considered himself very selfless. But if she didn't slow down, she was going to burn out and that also wouldn't be good, for his bank account or his friendship with a woman who was truly special to him.

Sasha looked up at him, distressed by his comment. "Am I too slow? I'm sorry...." She started to say but Robert interrupted her with a laugh.

"Dear, three paintings from you is like money in the bank. I don't know any other artist who can produce like you can so please, ignore my silly comments and understand that I'm absolutely thrilled with three paintings from you. I have some artists that work on one painting a year, and they don't have half as much talent as you do. With all the emotion you put into your paintings, I don't know how you get through the day. Your productivity concerns me, is all."

Sasha was relieved, not sure what the art world expected of her. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. She could only paint what she felt at the speed at which she was feeling things. The past year had been a pretty emotional disaster for her so she'd been extremely prolific lately. But she hoped to be able to focus on only one painting per year at some point. Maybe when she wasn't so centered on the past, she could....

Some day, she reassured herself. There will come a point in her life when she wouldn't feel this kind of pain or betrayal. There had been joy at one point. That period in her work had been a completely different style, but it had lasted for only a short period of time. She knew others who viewed her work might see the emotions in her paintings, but she hoped that they didn't understand them. Not completely at least.

An hour later, she helped Robert carefully pack the paintings into his trunk, ensuring that they were cautiously stored so they wouldn't be damaged, then waved goodbye to him as he drove back down the dusty, gravel road that was her driveway. He'd made her laugh this afternoon, which was a good thing. He was a delightful friend, even though she knew his motivation was more than a little mercenary. Robert gathered friends only to further his art business. Everyone had a purpose, either on the supply or demand side of the chain and he treated each person accordingly.

Sasha knew this about him and still accepted his friendship, but was also relieved when he drove away after each visit, needing his interruptions but appreciating the stillness and peace of her hideaway even more after he'd left.

Back inside, she put the kettle on to heat more water, her mind considering options for what she might paint next. Thoughts flitted through her mind and she considered and rejected some of them, storing others away. She was just about to pick up her sketch pad to work through some ideas when a strange noise in the distance distracted her. Glancing at the clock, she realized it was later than she thought. She hadn't had lunch yet and it was already three o'clock in the afternoon.

Placing her sketch pad back on the table, she told herself she'd take just a peek outside to find out what the odd sound was breaking the stillness of the early springtime afternoon. Then she'd make a sandwich and maybe even venture into the village to grab a cup of coffee, talk to some of her old friends a bit and make sure she stretched her social skills slightly.

The noise was becoming louder and she tucked her sketch pad down between her overstuffed chair and her easel, glancing out the window.

What she saw made her heart stop for a split second. Then her stomach dropped, followed immediately by the painful racing of her heart.

A helicopter?

There was only one reason a helicopter would be heading this way. The town was too quiet, too isolated for any other reason.

Sure enough, a moment later, the helicopter hovered over the small field in front of her cottage, then slowly descended. Glancing around the tree line of her property, she noted there were already several men standing around the edge of her field, the bulges under their dark suits barely concealing the large weapons Sasha knew to be hidden underneath the deceptive material.

As soon as the helicopter touched down, she watched in horror as the one man she'd prayed never to see again outside of a white fabric canvas stepped out, his long legs eating up the space between the powerful machine and her tiny, dilapidated cottage.

He wore expensive sunglasses and a perfectly tailored, summer weight tan suit with a white shirt opened at the collar, but nothing could hide the power of this man. It was physically apparent both in the way he walked and the commanding way he approached the world and her house, not to mention the muscles that were ripped over his body from grueling daily workouts that a lesser man would collapse under. No suit could hide the power of that physique, she thought while her mind whirled frantically.

As he approached her door with that intimidating stride, she wasn't sure what to do. To let him into her house would mean that his whole demeanor would invade the private space she'd created, a space that was devoid of any memories of this man. To not let him in would be dangerous. Not that he would allow that though. When Dante Fuitello wanted in, everyone else needed to just step back. She'd never known him let anyone stand in his way. She had no

idea what the consequences would be if someone dared to challenge him, because it simply was never done. At least she'd never seen or heard of it happening.

And then he was there, standing in front of her house. The option of not letting him inside was gone and her whole body trembled with memories of their time together, of how passionate and wonderful he could be. And how brutally cold, impersonal and dispassionate he could turn. She'd experienced both sides and never wanted either extreme again. Her life was calm and, if not peaceful, at least it wasn't disrupted by the angry words and horrible accusations that had been almost daily life with him. And the passion, she thought. Yes, there had been more passion than she thought was possible. Dante could bring her to the heights of heaven, but life with him could also be a living hell. Loving him was....difficult.

The knock on the door was fast and reflected the confidence this man had that the world would react exactly as he demanded it would, and it didn't matter if it was the stock market or a company, somehow the world complied and bowed to this man's wishes.

She couldn't open the door. So many feelings were clogging her senses right now that her feet were rooted on the floor. There were no messages from her brain to her feet telling her to move. She simply stood in the middle of her small den, staring at the door.

Sasha should have known that he'd just enter. Dante wasn't the kind of man who waited for permission so when the initial knock didn't provide the desired reaction, he simply opened the door and walked in.

Why hadn't she locked the door? Why hadn't she hidden in her bedroom? Why hadn't she run into the woods at the very first realization of a helicopter approaching?

As he stepped into her house, he had to duck underneath the door frame because he was so tall. The house had been made over two hundred years ago at a time when people were shorter, but even by today's standards Dante was huge. At six feet, three inches tall, he was at least half a head taller than most men. If that didn't separate him out from the rest of the world, his black hair and black eyes, chiseled facial features that were normally devoid of any emotion except for the rare moments when he was mildly amused, would capture anyone's attention.

"What are you doing here?" she finally asked after they'd stood there watching each other for a long, awkward moment.

Dante looked at the one woman who had gotten beneath his guard. The one person who had never bowed to his bidding, never reacted the way he expected. He was surprised at how angry he had become just by entering her world. He'd thought this would be a simple mission but seeing her standing in front of him, looking like the goddess he'd first glimpsed so long ago, his reaction was probably understandable.

She'd lost a good deal of weight over the past year. She'd always been thin but now her jeans hung on her hips and the large shirt that was tied at her waist couldn't cinch in enough. It was a man's shirt anyway and on her delicate frame, it was about ten sizes too large.

Eyes that had once danced with laughter and excitement over everything, were now large, brown saucers in a face that looked....haunted. She was pale, the only color in her face were those still beautiful, soulful, brown eyes. And he had no idea what she'd done with her hair.

He suspected nothing at all which was a crime since this woman's hair had been the softest, most luxurious thing he'd ever....

Dante forced his mind back to the problem. "I've tried calling you," he said to break the silence.

Sasha wasn't sure how to respond. When she worked, she shut off her cell phone so if he'd tried to reach her, he would have gotten her voice mail and she hadn't checked it yet. She tried to speak, but the words were stuck in her throat. She coughed and tore her hungry eyes away from him. "Would you like some tea?" she asked, manners coming to save her in this instance. She wasn't sure what was the polite comment to make when one's estranged husband walked through the door unexpectedly.

There was no answer but she didn't care. She moved into her tiny kitchen, needing to do something with her hands. She filled up the kettle and lit the burner, becoming more nervous as he prowled her cottage, looking at all the details. There wasn't much to see. The furniture was sparse with only one large chair and an ottoman for reading, a side table and lamp, all of which were positioned for a body to obtain maximum heat from the now cold and blackened fireplace. There was an old, wooden bookshelf filled with various genres, but that was about it. Her dining room had been converted to her studio and that contained several lights to help her work, stacks of varying sized canvases, her easel and paints. There wasn't a table and no chairs. The two windows and another fireplace were on the opposite wall, but the room wasn't meant for guests, although he prowled through that space as well but didn't look very interested, only mildly curious.

Sasha pulled down two cups and fiddled with the bags of tea, busying herself until she got up the nerve to ask him why he had decided to break away from his business empire to visit her quaint little town. While they'd been married, the man had worked fourteen to eighteen hour days, sometimes seven days a week. He'd rarely taken the time to spend quiet days with her. At least that was the case when they'd returned to his home in Rome.

The whole time he prowled her domain, she tried to work through in her mind why he was here. There had been no communication between the two of them, and even though she'd been expecting notice, she hadn't received anything from him or his lawyers asking for a divorce. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out from her hiding place and faced him, her chin going up defiantly. "Why did you come here?" she asked, angry that her voice quivered slightly, revealing how emotionally distraught she was with his presence.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"After the accusations you tossed at me the last time we were together, I'd rather hoped never to see you again."

"After the perfidy I discovered about you, I had resolved that very same thing."

"What you think you discovered. You're too distrusting to know what you saw." She snapped her mouth shut quickly. The last time they'd had this argument she'd sworn she would never defend herself against his callous words again. There was just something about this man that made her furious and defensive.

He shrugged slightly. "I'm not going to rehash the same, tedious argument with you, Sasha."

She was relieved, because this wasn't a dispute she could win and maintain her word to a friend. "Good. Then tell me why you're here and get out of my house." In her fantasy world, she lifted him up and tossed him out, just like she felt he'd done to her. He'd never touched her in anger, but his words had hurt just as badly.

"Nonna is ill."

There wasn't much he could have said that would have broken through her pain and anger at their last parting, but those words got her attention. During the nightmarish year that she'd been with this amazing man, his Grandmother Rennata had been the one steady, friendly and loving force in her life. She'd been a true friend and confidant. "She's not!"

He didn't even blink at her vehement rejection, but continued to stare at her steadily. "She's in the intensive care unit. She fell sick last week, but refused to see a doctor. It became steadily worse until two days ago when she didn't come down for dinner. When my mother went upstairs to check on her, Nonna Rennata couldn't be revived. We called an ambulance and by the time the doctors examined her, they explained that she'd had a series of heart attacks."

Those two last words spoken about the small, wonderful woman who had taken Sasha under her wing and treated her like a granddaughter struck her as painful. "No!"

Dante realized that his wife was genuinely upset by this, which confused him. She'd always kept apart from the family. He had no idea that Sasha cared one whit about his grandmother even though the elderly lady had asked for Sasha repeatedly during her illness. "She's stable," he said quickly, but the pained expression in his wife's eyes didn't diminish.

When she thought she could speak without her voice breaking, she asked, "How long has she been in the hospital?"

"Three days."

With a slight nod, Sasha accepted this, berating herself for not already knowing and keeping in touch with Rennata more closely. They communicated via e-mail and text, but the communication was sporadic and Sasha only logged into her e-mail about once a week. "Is she still...?"

Dante's mouth compressed in frustration and confusion. "As I said, she's stable. But she's been asking for you."

That snapped Sasha out of her panic and gave her something to do, something to help. "Of course. If Nonna needs me, I'll be there as fast as I can." She was already walking towards the stairs to pack a bag.

"We can be airborne as soon as you grab your purse."

That startled her. She glanced out the window and cringed inwardly at the thought of flying in a helicopter. Her fear of flying had been a source of embarrassment and she'd kept that from Dante, who didn't seem to have any fears. But to date, she'd only flown in planes which were much more reliable in her mind. A helicopter ride brought up new and more terrifying issues she'd never faced while flying in Dante's private fleet of jets.

She hated the idea of getting into that contraption but she needed time to figure out how to avoid it. And she needed to get away from this tall, devastatingly handsome man who hated her from the depths of his being.

Bowing her head slightly, she started to move towards the stairs. "Let me just pack some clothes," she said, refusing to let the panic take over. She could deal with the fear of flying, even in a helicopter, if it meant getting to Nonna Rennata more quickly. She'd flown often enough in order to be close to Dante during their marriage and she hadn't broken down, she could get through this.

Deep breathing, imaging exercises, remember the "up" bumps in turbulence and not just the "down" bumps...most important, positive thinking. The plane, or now the helicopter, is not going to crash and millions of people fly safely in planes every day.

Sasha wasn't sure about the number that traveled safely in helicopters, but she pushed herself to focus on packing. Getting to Rennata. That was the most important issue.

Dante tried to halt her momentum but Sasha was already heading towards the stairs. "You don't need clothes. All the clothes you had during our short marriage are still at the house are still available for your use."

She stopped and looked at him with confusion. And thankfully it also distracted her from the upcoming flight in what she was trying desperately hard not to think of as a death trap. "Those clothes I had I lived with you in Italy?" She couldn't claim that she'd bought them, but she'd definitely worn them to try and please him and placate his mother. "You didn't get rid of them?"

His eye brows snapped together, revealing his irritation with the question. "Of course not. They are worth a small fortune."

She squared her shoulders, wishing she didn't feel the need to defend the cost of clothes she didn't like and weren't her style. But something about the expression on his handsome face made her step back and shake her head. "Not my choice. Your mother bought most of those for me. I never asked for nor wanted most of them."

He sighed and shrugged slightly, his expression changing from the subtly accusatory to the unconcerned. "She probably bought whatever she thought was appropriate for you. Can you get your purse? We need to be in the air as soon as possible. I don't want Nonna to be wondering where you are. Any stress could cause a problem so we should hurry."

That shook her to the core, all the fight knocked out of her at the possibility of hurting that gentle lady. "Of course," she said and stood up straighter, forcing her mind to work faster. "I need to get some clothes. I know there are designer clothes at your house, but I won't wear those ever again." She raced up the stairs before he could argue with her or try and convince her that the clothes from their marriage were more appropriate than the items she felt comfortable wearing. Tossing a couple pairs of jeans and a pair of shorts into a suitcase defiantly, she added tee shirts, sandals, a few dressier clothes that she preferred, and a casual sundress just to irritate Dante's mother and she was ready to leave.

It took her less than five minutes and she was pulling the small case back down the stairs. "I'm ready," she said and glanced around, wondering if there was anything she needed to do. But since she'd only be gone for a day or two, she thought that anything she'd left hanging here could wait. She grabbed her purse, her passport and made sure her cell phone was inside, then turned to follow Dante. "Lead the way," she quipped.

Dante had always been fascinated by this woman although why he had no idea. She had never fit his lifestyle, was too gregarious, too trusting and too undisciplined. He lived his life with great deliberation, requiring order and schedule to each part of his day. This woman lived her life on the edge of one emotion or another, feeling too much and reacting on those emotions. Regardless, from the moment he'd met her, he had been drawn to her. She was beautiful, no doubt about that. Her figure had tormented him from the first time he'd run into her, and he'd resisted her allure for all of five minutes before finally giving in and accepting that there was just something about her that he needed. He certainly accepted the sexual need, that had been present from first sight.

But seeing her now with her ragged duffle bag and her eyes once again alight with purpose and determination, he remembered how much he'd wanted to possess her, to control her and place his stamp of ownership on her. She was like a beautiful, delicate and rare hummingbird flitting wherever she needed to be. If she liked a place, she would return. If she didn't, she was strong enough to fly away leaving just a taunting glimpse of heaven.

He cursed under his breath as he followed her across the field of weeds and overgrown grass towards the helicopter, his eyes drawn to her long legs, picturing those legs wrapped around his waist as they had so many times in the past. No woman had ever gotten to him like this one had. And he resented that she still had power over him, even knowing what he knew about her morals, his body still wanted to melt into her and his mind wanted to possess her. Unfortunately, he'd found out that her morals were non-existent, a character trait that should have eliminated his desire for her.

It just went to prove that a man's body was controlled by what he saw, and not what was underneath. He could ignore this attraction though. He had more evidence than he had the first time he'd tried to fight it and he would win this round no matter how lush and sultry her body appeared to him.

He resisted the urge to help her by putting a hand to her round derriere as she climbed into the luxurious helicopter. His hands burned when she slipped slightly and they automatically reached out to steady her. Fortunately, he pulled back quickly enough and she was able to right herself without his assistance. She stepped into the helicopter and took one of the plush, leather seats, sitting back and closing her eyes.