

The Cursed Canvases

Chapter One

“That cow definitely resembles Lady Hebbly,” Annabel Fellbridge said, scribbling a note in the margin of her catalogue. “Don’t you think so?”

Her friend Eliza Denton, who’d come down from Hampstead to visit this year’s Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Art, squinted judiciously at the largest cow in a canvas titled *Lowther Castle, Westmoreland: Evening* that hung in the Anteroom at Somerset House. “I don’t know. I’m not acquainted with the lady in question. Don’t you think that it might be the other way around, perhaps?”

Annabel looked quickly about them, but the display rooms at Somerset House were particularly sparsely attended this morning, thank goodness. It didn’t do to say something like that about the wife of the head of the Royal Academy’s Hanging Committee, Sir Henry Hebbly, even if it happened to be true. “Hmm. Perhaps a trifle. Antonia Hebbly’s never been accused of being a beauty, but she’s the dearest, kindest person I know. She’s a friend of my mother’s.”

“What about the other cows?” Eliza pointed at a complacent-looking Belted Galloway. “That one looks very pleased with herself.”

“Yes, and it also looks like Lady Hebbly.” Annabel made another note. “This is bad. Very bad.”

“Did they look like that the last time you were here?”

“No. The last time the monkey in *The Bath at the Harem* was the one that looked like Lady Hebbly. And Sir Henry’s portrait of Lady Hebbly looked very much like a baby pig.”

“But baby pigs can be quite appealing.”

“Not *this* baby pig.”

When Sally had told the ladies of the Almack’s Special Committee that rumors were beginning to fly around London that there was something very odd about some of the pictures at the Annual Exhibition, the reaction had mostly been amusement. But today, on her third visit, Annabel was no longer smiling. Something *was* very wrong here—and it was being done very deliberately.

Sally had requested they take turns visiting the Exhibition multiple times and take notes on any pictures that seemed strange in any way. On her first visit, Annabel had thought that several of the portraits on display had...the only way she could think to describe it was *caricatured* features. One of them, a portrait of an elderly, august bishop, had pointed ears peeking out from beneath his wig; the portrait of his equally dignified wife had faint but definite cat whiskers. On her second visit the very next day those portraits were as they should be, sans pointed ears and

whiskers—but Lady Hebbly’s bore more than a passing resemblance to a not-very-appealing baby pig. Today, a few days later, it was *Lowther Castle, Westmoreland: Evening* in which all the cows somehow managed to possess uncannily human expressions.

Eliza leaned forward to examine the cows in the background more closely. “My word, they *all* resemble her!” She looked at Annabel, her eyes wide. “And you and your friends are investigating this, I presume?”

Annabel hesitated. She had not *exactly* told Eliza about Almack’s other role but had intimated that there were ladies who possessed certain powers on a par with hers and who kept an eye on matters that took an out-of-the-ordinary—or yes, supernatural turn.

“Yes,” she said. “We’ve divided up the days and assigned them so that one of us is here to take observations both morning and afternoon. We’ll meet shortly to compare and discuss what we’ve seen.”

“That ought to be an interesting exercise.” Eliza grimaced. “Might we sit down for a moment? Wearing new shoes today was not a good choice.”

“Of course. There are benches in the Great Room.” Sitting for a few minutes would allow her to catch up on her notes.

“How is he doing it?” As they moved toward the door, Eliza nodded towards a large canvas entitled *Nausicaä and Her Handmaidens*, in which the girls clustering around their princess somehow managed to look like a school of startled mackerel. “Is he sneaking in at night and—and—”

“And repainting all the pictures? I don’t think so.” Annabel checked her catalogue. *Nausicaä* had been painted by Sir Henry Hebbly. Hmm.

“Which is why you and your friends have found them of interest,” Eliza said. The word “magic” was left unsaid but hovered between them, nevertheless.

“Yes. Whether or not we’ll be able to find a pattern that tells us anything about the perpetrator—” Halfway through the door into the Great Room, she stopped speaking. There, standing before a picture not far from the benches that were their destination, stood her friend Lord Glenrick and another vaguely familiar-looking man, deep in conversation.

Lord Glenrick glanced up, and his serious expression melted into a broad smile. “My dear Lady Fellbridge! What an unexpected pleasure!” he said, coming to meet them.

Annabel held out her hand and smiled at him warmly. “Good morning, my lord. I beg your pardon if we’ve disturbed you—”

“Not in the least. Ross and I were merely chatting.”

Annabel looked at the other man, who had not joined them and did not appear to share Lord Glenrick’s pleasure at the interruption. It hadn’t appeared to be a “chat” to her...but it was also none of her affair. “And we were just enjoying the pictures. Eliza, may I present Lord Glenrick?”

Lord Glenrick, my friend Mrs. Denton.”

Lord Glenrick bowed and gave Eliza his usual charming smile. “Are you enjoying the Exhibition, madam?”

Eliza’s lips twitched, but she restrained herself. “It’s always an...er, enriching experience to have the chance to view so much art at once.”

“Enriching.” He pulled a long face. “That’s an excellent way of putting it. I shall have to remember that.”

“Are you not an appreciator of art, sir?”

“I prefer literature or music to paint but will readily admit it’s a failing rather than a virtue. And besides, one must be able to say yes, one has been to the Exhibition, and wasn’t it a crashing bore...or a splendid show, depending on one’s audience.”

Annabel smiled. “My lord, you are a cynic!”

He returned her smile. “I prefer ‘an honest man,’ but will happily accept any name that falls from your lips.” He leaned closer. “I was going to call but will take this opportunity instead to invite you to drive with me to Hampton Court on Wednesday if you are not engaged. Do say yes. It is too long since I’ve had the opportunity to monopolize your attention.”

She laughed but was acutely aware of Eliza’s presence. “Thank you. I should enjoy that very much.”

“Splendid. Is eleven too early? No? Then I shall see you then. I perceive that my friend is eager to see the rest of the pictures, so I shall say *au revoir*, ladies.” He bowed and turned back to his companion, who indeed had begun to look impatient. Odd that Lord Glenrick hadn’t presented him or included him in the conversation, though she had finally remembered who he was when Lord Glenrick mentioned his nickname. Lord Rossing had been one of Freddy’s acquaintances whom she’d met once or twice—a typical taciturn northerner, as she recalled, mostly concerned with his horses and his immense pride in his descent. Not the man she would have expected to be viewing the annual Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, but one never knew.

The two men left the room, Lord Glenrick glancing over his shoulder to smile at her once more as they did. When they had gone, Eliza hobbled to the green baize-covered bench and sank onto it with a small groan. “Oh, that’s better. Annabel, isn’t that the man you told me about whom Geoffrey so dislikes? Who is he, again?”

Was that the faintest edge of rebuke in her question? Instead of sitting, Annabel went to examine a nearby painting. No distortions or changes from the last time she had viewed it. She wrote a small zero next to its name in her catalogue and examined its neighbors before answering. “Yes, it is—though I still don’t understand why Lord Quinceton dislikes him. He’s always perfectly charming. And he’s the Duke of Carrick’s heir and brother to one of my fellow

Lady Patronesses.”

“You’re going to make me stand up and follow you around if I want to talk to you, aren’t you? And I thought you were kind.” Eliza sighed and made to stand up again.

Annabel relented and went to sit next to her. “I still have to finish looking,” she warned.

“We can finish together as soon as my feet stop throbbing. He’s smitten, isn’t he?”

“Who?”

“I shall now exercise vast amounts of restraint and not hit you with my catalogue,” Eliza said in a long-suffering voice. “That man. Lord Glenrick. Smitten. With you.”

“Oh, no—I wouldn’t say that—” Goodness, was she blushing?

“I would. Are you smitten in return?”

Why was Eliza examining her so closely? “No, of course not! I—I’ve given up on men, I think.”

Eliza snorted. “At your age? Why should you? Hmm. Maybe that’s why Geoffrey can’t abide him.”

Annabel drew in her breath. “Eliza, that’s—that’s scarcely likely. Lord Quinceton doesn’t care what Lord Glenrick thinks of me.”

“You think so?” Eliza pursed her lips.

Annabel hesitated. Lord Quinceton had left London for a few days to confer with his bailiff at his estate in Gloucestershire after their adventure sorting out her cousin Hartley’s engagement to Miss Pouli. At first she’d been relieved to know he was elsewhere; the memory of how she’d defended him in his very presence to her Cousin Medea still made her squirm.

But that relief had been short-lived, and to her dismay she’d actually found herself *missing* the wretched man. It was an unsettling realization; just weeks ago she’d told Emily she couldn’t abide the creature. But there was simply no reason to believe he cared about whether or not Lord Glenrick was smitten by her. The idea was quite nonsensical.

“I don’t see why he should,” she said firmly. “Why should it matter to him?”

Eliza opened her mouth to answer, but Annabel forestalled her by standing up. “Are your feet feeling better? If not, you can stay here while I look at the rest of the pictures.”

Eliza seemed to understand she didn’t want to pursue the conversation, bless her. She climbed to her feet with a small wince. “No, but they’ll hold me up a little longer. I should like to see if there are any more pictures of cows with whom you are acquainted.”

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