

## The problem with men

\*Mirabelle\*

I leave the drawing room and walk straight to my mother's chamber, the one place where I am sure not to be disturbed.

Not much has changed since my mother died. It is still the same owery boudoir that it was when Rosalyn was alive, minus the most important thing: the sparkling, charming person who made it her own.

Who made my father love her, no matter how unfaithful she was. Who made all those other men love her too.

Who loved me for more than my beauty.

I sit down at the dressing table just as I did when I was a mere fourteen, devastated by my mother's sudden death. There is dust on the silver brushes; I have to remind Tinkle to make sure the maids clean the rooms properly.

I touch each one, remembering how my mother used to sit on the stool, brushing her hair and roaring with laughter at whatever I told her. No one ever laughed at my jokes the way she did. Rosalyn had the gift of making me feel like the wittiest person in the world.

I sigh. My mother would have loved the joke about the light frigate docking at the Wales harbor.

And then she would have dabbed on scent and rushed away to meet some darling, delicious man, her eyes still twinkling.

Finally, I take my nger off the silver brush and raise my head. Rosalyn's portrait dimpled from the wall. I smile, and without even glancing at the mirror before me, I know that precisely the same dimple has appeared in my cheek. Precisely the same curls, like pale primroses. The same wide blue eyes, the same naughty cherry mouth, the same...

Not the same.

Oh, I have my mother's charm. I know that. I can twinkle at a man just the way she used to, and it is an odd man who doesn't get a faintly glazed expression in his eyes. Zenobia calls it the 'family smile,' and says it is our greatest inheritance. But what I don't do is...

Follow through.

I don't even like being kissed, if the truth be told.

Kisses are messy, and saliva... well, saliva is disgusting.

I have always thought that one day a man would stroll into the ballroom and I would realize that he is the one whom I can tolerate kissing. But no one appears who sparks that realization, not once during the season. That is why I irted so wildly with the prince.

A she-wolf who is irting with a prince is generally excused from irting with other men, who understand exactly why, so it isn't as if I am being rude. Besides, in my spare moments, I generally twinkle at them, to keep a whole crowd about me. It makes me feel as if I am on stage, à la Zenobia.

Who would have thought that the biggest thing of all... that quality of my mother's that practically denied her... would be so denitively missing in Rosalyn's only daughter?

And yet, so it is.

Not only do I not desire men, I don't even like them very much.

They are big, and hairy, and tend to smell. Even my father, whom I love, acts like a little boy. He complains and whines and carries on in the most tiresome fashion. They are all like little boys, I think. And who could desire a little boy?

My mother's voice sounds in my head, and I answer it irritably: hung like a horse or not, men are still pitiful creatures.

But it makes me think of something. If the beta is incapable, then...

Then he is incapable.

We wouldn't have to kiss. I wouldn't have to put up with all that is implied by a man hung like a horse, which... Thank you, Mama... has revolted and horried me for years.

All I have to do is appear to be carrying a child long enough to marry him, and then pretend to have lost the baby.

I have never met a man yet whom I couldn't charm into a good temper. I have learned at the feet of a master, after all. My mother kept my father sweet-tempered... even after he had to throw my French tutor out of the house, and roust another lover out of his new bed.

In fact, I can make a rational argument for marriage to Rhys. I would never cuckold him, for one thing.... A man with his problem has to be afraid of that possibility.

I am the best he could hope for: both beautiful and chaste. Practically sainthood material, really.

I stand up and take a last look around my mother's room. "I miss you," I tell the laughing portrait on the wall. "I do miss you." But the words pull at my heart, so I hurry from the room.