

Lost Love

By

Maryse Dawson

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Chapter One

The Year of our Lord, 1331...

Arabella Dufour silently crawled forward along the hayloft and settled herself down to watch her favorite spectacle: Ulric Griffin bathing. She had very nearly missed this wondrous spectacle, thanks to Marie, her little sister who was always asking for one thing or another—this time her favorite kitten. How should she know where the daft animal was? She had helped her look for a few minutes and then hastily left to see Ulric.

She sighed contentedly as she focused her eyes on him. The water sluiced down his body, dripping off his lean, muscular torso. She smiled longingly and placing her elbows on the floor, put her face in her hands, a dreamy look taking over her face. If only he would notice her.

But Ulric still treated her like a child. She was thirteen. There was hardly any difference in years between them as far as she was concerned. He was nineteen, yet he could not see her for the woman she was. He only had eyes for Mirabelle, her cousin. She pouted. It wasn't fair.

Taken in by her father, Ulric had been trained as a knight under the protective care of Arnscroft castle. He had lost his parents to the pox and would have been left to scour the streets for food if her father had not happened upon him. He had taken pity on him and, at fourteen, he had joined the household.

Arabella had immediately become infatuated with the dark, long-haired youth and followed him around like a puppy. At first he had tolerated her, but as the years went by she noticed that he seemed to spend more time with Mirabelle than her. She frowned and chewed on a piece of straw. What did Mirabelle have that she didn't? Except maybe age. She was eighteen and as dark as Arabella was blonde. Aye, she was pretty, but she was also self-centered.

She suddenly realized Ulric was staring at her. She went beet-red and backed away from the loft window.

"Arabella! Get down here!"

Oh, Lord. She crept stealthily along the loft and began to climb down the ladder, hoping to get away before he confronted her. But she had no such luck. He grabbed her as she reached the bottom and pulled her around to face him. He had thrown on his shirt, and it stuck to his damp flesh accentuating his muscles even more.

She blinked rapidly and tried to focus on what he was saying.

"Willst thou desist spying on me!" he accused. "I told thee last time to keep away."

"I was not spying!" she lied. "I was looking for Marie's kitten. She hath lost him again."

"A likely story!"

"I speak the truth, thee can ask her."

He folded his arms across his chest and pierced her with eyes as blue as the sky. "Thou knowest it maketh me uncomfortable when thee doth regard me so. Thou art too young to watch men naked."

She stomped her foot. "I am not too young! I am yet thirteen years of age!"

"Aha so thee doth admit it—thee didst watch me." He quirked an eyebrow.

Her face reddened even more at being caught out. "I didst not!"

His deep laughter rang out through the barn, and realizing the futility of protesting her innocence any further, she ran off. Why she loved him so she knew not. He could be infuriating!

* * *

The next day Arabella sat threading daisies on the grounds just outside the castle while watching Mirabelle flirt outrageously with Ulric.

She pouted sullenly and curled her hand into a fist, crushing the daisy angrily. Ulric was a fool. Mirabelle was only playing with him, she had said so on many occasions, but he couldn't see it. He was infatuated. Mirabelle's real love was for Merek, the son of her father's best friend. She had full intentions of marrying him. Ulric didn't stand a chance, but the addle-brained fool still had eyes for just her, when under his very nose was the love of his life...only he didn't know it just yet. She thumped the ground angrily. What could she do to make him notice her?

While she sat broodingly watching them, she tried to think on a plan, but came up with nothing. Suddenly, she noticed Ulric had his hand on Mirabelle's waist. She sat forward and her mouth fell open with surprise at his forwardness. Mirabelle made no attempt to push him away either, which was most unusual—especially as she professed only love for Merek.

Arabella was even more surprised, when Ulric leaned down and kissed Mirabelle fully on the lips.

A wave of jealousy washed over her. How could he? How could she?

Unable to witness their lovemaking any longer, she jumped up and ran into the bailey, throwing herself into the farthest corner to sob her heart out. If their father knew that Ulric had taken such liberties, then surely he would demand that he marry Mirabelle. That was so unfair, Ulric was hers. Mirabelle didn't even want him.

Suddenly a plan began to hatch in her mind. She gasped at her own audacity. Could she pull off such a plan? Would it work?

Feeling excited but nervous, she wiped her tears away and went off in search of her father. He was studying some maps with the castle constable, Brom, in the anteroom and looked up as she entered.

"Arabella." His eyes crinkled at the appearance of his eldest daughter.

"Father, may I speak with thee in private?"

He looked at Brom and nodded. "Leave us, Brom."

"Aye, milord."

He smiled at Arabella as he walked past, but she only had eyes for her father. Now she was here, she wasn't so sure if the words she wanted to say would pass her lips. But straightening her back, she sucked in a deep breath for courage and blurted out, "Ulric kissed me, father!"

Whatever she was expecting, it wasn't the outright anger that suddenly appeared on his face. "Kissed thee!" he thundered, his face turning a frightening shade of purple.

She shrank back, a little intimidated by his display of anger. "Aye, father. Should we not marry now?"

"*Marry him?* A man with no prospects, no land, art thou addle-brained, daughter?" He paced up and down in front of her, angrier than she'd seen him in a long time. Mayhap she should withdraw her lie, but her father would punish her soundly if he found out.

"Ulric will marry no daughter of mine! I hath other plans for thee, child, and they do not include a penniless boy."

"But father..."

"Go to thy chamber immediately. Thou will not see Ulric again!"

She gasped, and tears formed in her eyes at his harsh words. "Father cannot..."

"*Go!*" He bellowed, pointing at the door. She quickly ran off, tears flowing down her cheeks. *What had she done?*

* * *

Ulric was summoned into the castle by Brom. "Lord Dufour wishes to speak with thee on a matter most urgent."

"Me?"

"Aye, thou art to come forthwith."

Ulric frowned. Something in Brom's tone spoke of foreboding. He liked it not. Striding through the great hall, he was taken into the smaller anteroom.

Brom left them alone with instructions to wait outside the door.

Lord Dufour stood with one hand on the fireplace, staring down into the flames. Ulric shifted uneasily.

"Thee wished to speak with me, milord?"

He watched Lord Dufour's jaw tighten before he turned to face him, his expression full of anger. "Speak with thee? I wouldst prefer to run a sword through thee, thou upstart!"

"Pardon, milord?" He could feel his heart begin to race. Something was afoot.

"I take thee into my household, I feed thee, train thee, and this is how thee doth repay me? By kissing one of my progeny!"

Ulric's stomach lurched. How the devil had he found out? One kiss—that was all he had taken. One small kiss.

"Milord, prithe accept my humble apology."

"Apology! Didst thee think that I would approve a marriage betwixt thee?"

"'Twas yet a kiss, milord. We spoke not of marriage." He quickly realized it was the wrong thing to say as Lord Dufour's looks turned even more thunderous. "I mean to say..."

"I knowest what thou meant, boy. My daughter is yet only thirteen, and I wouldst see her married to a man of property, something thee will never hath. If thou thought to seek thy own satisfaction and take advantage of her youthful innocence, then thou art a knave."

"Thirteen, milord? Mirabelle is yet eighteen!"

A look of confusion passed over Lord Dufour's face. "Mirabelle? 'Tis Arabella thee kissed. I hath seen the way she looks at thee, but I thought thee a man of honor. I was yet wrong!"

"Nay, milord. 'Twas not Arabella I kissed, but Mirabelle. We art in love."

"Mirabelle dost not love thee! She is to be married to Merek of Blackstone this very year. Didst thee think to bed both my daughter and my niece? Arabella said it was she thee had kissed. If so, I should slay thee now!" He took a threatening step towards him.

Ulric held up both his hands defensively. "Milord, prithe upon my honor, I hath never touched Arabella—I sought only to court Mirabelle. I wouldst make her a good husband."

"Then thy words condemn thee, boy. As much as I am fond of thee—thou art banished from this castle and will leave immediately! I will not hath thee coming betwixt Mirabelle and Merek."

His stomach lurched. Since the death of his mother, this had been the only home he'd ever known. "Milord! I beg of thee, do not banish me. Where will I go?"

His mind was in turmoil. He had no coin, how would he live?

"I care not. Thou hath betrayed my kindness for thy own selfish yearnings. Thee will be gone!" He strode to the door and summoned Brom inside. "Brom, let it be known that from this day onwards, Ulric Griffin is banished from our lands." He turned his angry gaze on Ulric with a mixture of disbelief and disappointment. "Take him from my sight!"

Ulric would never forget the look on his face for as long as he lived. With a heavy heart, he accompanied Brom from the room, vowing that in this life or the next he would have his revenge on that little vixen, Arabella.

* * *

Arabella lay sobbing on her bed. She had done such a bad thing. Jealousy had taken hold over reason—what had she condemned Ulric to? What did her father mean by saying she would never see him again. Fresh tears fell. How could she bear never seeing her true love again?

Her chamber door opened, and she rolled over to see her father enter the room. He carried a small stick in his hand. A stick she had encountered on many an occasion on her backside.

Her stomach roiled. Oh no. He'd found out she had told a lie. She wiped her tears away and stared at him.

"F-father?"

"Thee lied, did thee not, daughter? 'Twas not thee that Ulric kissed, but thy cousin!"

"I-I..."

"Deny it not. I saw in Ulric's eyes the truth. Why didst thee lie?" He sat down on the bed next to her and placed a hand under her chin, forcing her to look at him.

Her lips trembled as she revealed her true feelings for Ulric.

"Tis but a passing fancy, Arabella. Thou art destined to marry someone of noble birth, not a mere upstart without any prospects. I wouldst see thee well cared for. Ulric is not the man for thee, and when thou art older, thou will understand."

"Where is Ulric?"

"He is gone."

"Gone? But father..."

"Nay, Arabella. From this day, thou will forget his existence. Now, stand at the end of the bed and lean over. Thou will accept thy punishment for lying to me."

Arabella thought about defying him, but from previous experience knew that would only lead to making him angrier than ever. She did as she was bid and leaned over the end of her bed. As the first thwack touched her backside, she closed her eyes and accepted the pain. For how could it be as painful as a love lost forever?

* * *

Nine years later...

Arabella stomped her foot angrily. "But I do not wish to marry him!"

Her father regarded her angrily. "Thou wilt do as thou art told, Arabella! This marriage will go ahead as planned whether thou art agreeable or not." He paced in front of her. "Thou art twenty-two and 'tis high time thou found a mate. John of Terryn hath come forward with a proposal, and I hath accepted. He owns lands on the Northern peninsular and hath accumulated wealth that will keep thee in the finest gowns."

"But I knowest him not!" she argued. "Wouldst thou hath me marry a man I hath never met?"

"Aye, daughter, I wouldst, for I hath met him and approved him myself, I wouldst give thee to no other man."

"Give me? *Give me!* Thou speaketh as though I am a parcel to be handed around! I am thy eldest daughter—dost my opinion mean so little?"

His face softened slightly, and he stroked her cheek gently. "Tis why I love thee that I am securing thy future. War is afoot and I wouldst see thee settled."

"But father..."

"Nay, child. Speak no more of it. Thou wilt marry on the morrow."

He walked off before she could say any more, leaving her staring futilely after him.

* * *

The morning dawned with a strong wind blowing and rain buffeting heavily against the narrow apertures. She rolled over in bed and snuggled down into the coverlet.

"Now, milady, 'tis time thee arose!" Mary, her maid, was already placing her breakfast on the table and fussing around the room. She placed her hand on her mistress's coverlet and peered down at her face. "Thy marriage is set for two hours hence and I wouldst see thee at thy best."

"God's bones, Mary. Can thou not take my place? I am certain John of Terryn will not notice as he knowest not my face."

"John is not for the likes of me, milady. Thou art the only one deserving of such a man."

"And I wouldst not hath him. Mayhap, I should run away. See how he wants me then!"

"Hush, milady. If thy father hears such words he will take the strap to thee."

Arabella shivered. Her maid spoke the truth. Her father took only so much before dishing out punishment. His leniency ran thin. Running away from a marriage he had taken the time to arrange would suffice in her ending up the worse off.

Rolling out of bed, she resigned herself to her fate.

* * *

Dressed in her bridal gown and clutching a posy of flowers, Arabella walked through the courtyard towards the chapel, her arm linked through her father's. She was dreading the upcoming ceremony.

The rain had finally stopped, but the wind still blustered, sending shivers through her slight frame.

Since her father's meeting with Lord John of Terryn, her future husband had not made an appearance. Apart from a brief description of him, she had no idea what to expect. Her father had told her only that he was twenty-eight years of age, tall of stature and wealthy. She shivered, fearing her wedding night ahead. She knew hardly anything about what happened between a man and a woman, only what she had heard the maids whispering about and that wasn't much. She had no mother to advise her as she had died in childbirth when Marie was born. Arabella had only been five at the time, so didn't remember much.

To lay with a man was daunting enough, but she had thought to couple in the arms of a man she loved, not one that was chosen against her wishes. Pursing her lips, she entered the small chapel, and they walked up the aisle.

"Lord Terryn is not here yet?" her father asked Father Rulf.

He shook his head in response. "Nay, milord but there is yet time. Prithee take a pew. I would hath words with Arabella, if I may?"

While her father seated himself at the front, Father Rulf lead Arabella off to one side. Standing in the south transept, he quietly assessed her. "Art thou resigned to this marriage, my child?"

Arabella snorted softly. "In truth, nay! But I will do my duty as hath been called upon me."

"To resist would be an act against thy father, and in doing so, against God himself. For it states in the holy book that thou must honor thy parents."

She closed her eyes and sighed softly. "I knowest, Father Rulf. I will obey his request, but in doing so it doth not give me pleasure. Wherefore must I wed a man I knowest not!"

He patted her arm. "If thy father hath agreed to the union then it is for the best. Thy father doth love thee, Arabella. He wouldst see no harm come to thee. Lord John of Terryn must be a great knight for thy father to entertain marriage. After all, his only concern is thy future well being."

She shrugged. "Thy words speak the truth, but I cannot help my feelings."

"Be brave, child. I am always here for thee."

Suddenly, the chapel door blew open and a group of knights strode in. The one at the front, taller than the rest, strode with purpose up to the altar. Father Rulf patted her hand. "I do believe Lord John hath arrived."

Her eyes grew wide as she took in the size of the man she was supposed to wed. He was huge. Dressed in black from head to toe, he stared back at her assessingly. Unkempt dark-brown, shoulder-length hair hung loosely around his face, which was covered by a straggly beard and moustache. He looked akin to a wild man from the fens—dark and foreboding. She licked her lips nervously. Was this truly the man her father wished her to marry?

She became aware that Father Rulf was talking to her. "My pardon, what didst thou say?"

An understanding smile crossed his face. "I asked thee to take thy place next to Lord John, so we can begin the ceremony."

"Of course." She allowed him to lead her over to the altar. Her future husband stared down at her, his eyes piercing hers.

"Milady." He nodded and placed her small hand in his. His voice was deep and refined, belying his disheveled appearance.

Arabella trembled from head to toe, and would have liked nothing better than to run from the chapel and this strange man who would soon be joined to her in holy matrimony, but her sense of duty overcame her fears. She resolved herself to stay put and endure whatever the future beheld.

* * *

Arabella looked down at the ring on her finger in a daze. She was now Lady Arabella of Terryn.

"Milady, I wouldst ask thee to bid thy father farewell, for we depart to Terryn within the hour," said John, seated at the dais next to her.

Her face fell. "Today? Thou wouldst leave today, but I thought we would abide here for a few days at least?"

"Nay, wife. We leave for Terryn today. I will not dally."

The word 'wife' sounded strange. "But I do not wish to leave so soon!" she protested.

"I care not. As my wife thou will do as I bid."

Arabella stared at him. He was so curt and abrupt. To be parted from her father so soon was unthinkable. It would not harm him to stay a few more days. She set her face mulishly. "I will not go today!"

"Do you defy me?" His tone was sharp, and a shiver of fear slipped down her spine.

She raised her chin and snapped. "Aye. I wouldst not part from my father this early, there are words I wish to say to him, and I will not be hurried!"

He leaned sideways towards her and placed his mouth by her ear. "Thou art my property now, and I expect thy full obedience. Thou will be ready within the hour, or I will punish thee soundly for defiance."

He leaned back and raised his goblet to her, taking a full swig of her father's wine. She realized her mouth was hanging open. No one, apart from her father, had ever spoken to her in such a harsh tone, and she was more than a little shocked. Her father had married her to a barbarian! Without saying another word, she left the dais and stalked from the hall.

* * *

Half an hour later, Arabella was still stomping around her chamber, getting more and more incensed with her new husband's attitude. Wherefore didst he think he could treat her so? His property indeed! He had even threatened to punish her. What sort of husband had her father found for her? So what if he had wealth and lands. He could not treat her like this!

Mary entered her chamber carrying two large valises. "Lord John instructed me to bring these, milady. He said to pack thy clothes, as he wishes to leave shortly."

"Oh, did he? Well he can think again!" She picked one of the cases up and stormed from the room, throwing it straight down the stone staircase. She went back for the other, and was just about to launch it down the same stairs, when Lord John came into view. He glared up at her, fixing her with such a dark look that she stopped immediately. Quickly, she ran back into her chamber, threw the case on the floor and slammed the door.

Mary looked at her in fright. "What is it, milady?"

"Lord John doth come!"

Mary clapped a hand over her mouth and with eyes as big as saucers looked at the door latch as it began to lift. "Milady!"

Arabella tried with all her strength to keep the door from opening, but Lord John pushed it open with ease. He looked at Mary. "Leave us!"

She scampered out of the room, and Arabella quickly went to run past her husband, but his hand snaked out and grabbed her. Slamming the door with one hand, he dragged her towards the bed.

"Thou thinketh to thwart me, wife, and ruin my plans. 'Twill not happen." He sat down and threw her over his lap. She struggled and kicked out but to no avail. She felt a cold draught, as her skirts were thrown over her back, and his hand quickly descended on both buttocks.

She shrieked and bucked to get away, but he was far too strong for her. He held her with ease and laid into her backside again and again.

"Thou wilt not defy me! When I make a demand I expect it to be followed, dost thou understand?"

Smack! Smack! Smack!

"Aow!" she wailed. "Take thy hands off me!"

"Nay, wife. Thou art mine and I will see thee brought to heel."

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Oh, Lord. It hurt like the very devil. She winced as his iron-like hand touched her sit spots, blistering her bottom with heavy-handed swats. God's bones, if this was how marriage to Lord John was going to be...she wished with all her heart to escape it.

When her bottom was well and truly on fire, he stopped and let her scramble up from his lap. She stood in front of him and hopped from foot to foot as she rubbed furiously at her skin to try and relieve the pain.

"Thou wilt be ready to leave within the next half hour, or I will drag thee kicking and screaming without any baggage at all!" He stood up, and with a warning glare he left her alone to pack.

* * *

They rode through the night, arriving at Terryn early in the morning. Arabella was exhausted. Not only from the ride itself and the fast pace her husband wanted to keep up, but from her tender, freshly spanked bottom adding to her discomfort.

She waited for Lord John to help her dismount, but when he made no such offer, she had to jump down herself. She winced as her wobbly legs touched ground. She wanted nothing more than to fall into bed.

At those thoughts her heart skipped a beat. *Bed*. The last thing she wanted to do was submit to her domineering husband. Today would be their first night together as man and wife, and she was dreading it.

Stable hands came forward to take care of their horses, and she followed her husband into the keep. It was a strong-looking castle, and she noted that she was of great interest to the inhabitants. She smiled tentatively at a few of them and was greeted with shy smiles back. A good start. For that she was grateful. She had visions of them all being as harsh and untamed as Lord John. She was thankful that was not the case.

Once in the great hall, she listened as he barked out orders to the serving maids. A bath was ordered and she was shown up to their chamber.

He bowed politely to her. "Welcome, milady, to thy new home. Thy valises will arrive shortly, and I hath instructed Esme to aid thee unpack. When the bath is drawn, I will expect thee to assist me."

On that word he left her alone. She stared after him. Assist him with his bath? See him naked? She shuddered wondering if his body was as hairy as his face.

Esme arrived, breaking her train of thought. She was a dainty little thing, and Arabella took to her straight away. While she helped her unpack, Arabella asked her about Lord John.

"Is he always this abrupt?"

"Aye, milady. It is told he experienced great turmoil in his youth, thus making the man he is today."

"What happened?"

"I know not, milady, but sometimes I see great sadness upon him. Me thinks therein lies a man with a heart, but it is sorely hidden. Mayhap, since he hath found thee all will be well."

"But he dost not love me, Esme. Ours was an arranged marriage. There is no love within."

"I hath seen many marriages so, milady. Many lead to strong bonds betwixt man and wife. I pray that thine will be so." She smiled shyly and looked over to the large bath in front of the hearth. "Thy bath awaits. Would thee welcome some assistance?"

"Nay, she wouldst not. Leave us now." Lord John's deep voice filled the room when he swiftly entered.

Esme curtsied and quickly left. The room fell into silence behind her, apart from the steady crackle of the fire

"I will bathe first and thee will attend me," he stated, moving towards the bath.

"But I hath never bathed anyone, milord!"

"Then 'tis high time thee learned. Fetch the soap and flannel from yonder table while I disrobe."

She walked to the table and picked up the items he wanted, keeping her back turned for fear of seeing his naked form. When she heard the water splash she risked returning but kept her eyes lowered.

She heard a low rumble and realised he was mocking her. She flashed her eyes up to his.

He fixed her with a stare. "Wash my back." It was said as a challenge. Clamping her jaw tight, she soaped the flannel and placed it against his skin. She was surprised to see no hair on his back, unlike the wild beast she thought he kept concealed beneath his clothing. He leaned forward, allowing her easier access. She drew the flannel back and forth across his broad back. Apart from a few scars, his skin was smooth, his muscles defined.

He leaned back and told her to clean his front. She swallowed hard and put some more soap on the flannel. His chest was lightly dusted with hair down the middle. She washed his shoulders downwards, keeping her eyes securely fixed on his chest and not what was hovering just below the water line.

"Fetch the razor. I wish to shave," he demanded.

She walked over to the table and returned with his razor. She went to hand it to him and he placed his large hand on her wrist. "I wish thee to shave me."

She gasped. "But I hath never shaved a man! What if I cut thee?"

"Cut me and know the consequences."

His look was fierce, and she relived the spanking from yesterday. Her breathing grew shallow, and she licked her lips nervously. "Very well."

She placed the sharp blade against his cheek and gently scraped downwards. The hair came away easily, and she exhaled a breath. Before long she had scraped all the hair off, leaving him free of beard and moustache, having managed to nick not one bit of skin. Satisfied with her work, she cleaned the blade in the water and put it back on the table. It wasn't until she turned back to look at him from a distance that she froze in shock.

No longer was it Lord John of Terryn staring back at her, but in his place was Ulric Griffin.

"Wherefore..." was all she managed to stammer.

"Aye, my dearest, sweetest, devious little Arabella. It is I, Ulric Griffin, and I am come to seek my revenge!"