

# WHAT EYES CAN SEE

By Elisabeth Brown

*First Chapter Sample*



**P**LEASE DON'T MAKE ME GO," Arella begged, her large eyes pleading.  
Her stepmother sighed. "It's a matter of etiquette. One simply cannot refuse an invitation to the prince's royal ball."

"But I'm insignificant, Stepmother. No one will even notice I'm missing!" Arella persisted hopefully. "You and the other girls will certainly be good enough representations of our family."

"At important functions such as this, child, everyone who attends or does not attend is noted. I assure you, your absence would be taken as a personal affront to the entire royal family. And they would not look kindly on the slight." The stern lines in Duchess Germaine's face softened. "Besides, Arella, you are far from insignificant. You are one of the most beautiful girls in the kingdom and will surely be noticed by the prince."

Arella's face filled with worry. "I don't want him to notice me," she said quietly.

Drusilla, Arella's older stepsister, gave her a sympathetic smile. But Anastasia, the youngest, rolled her eyes. "Goodness, Arella, why not? What more could you possibly ask?"

Drusilla watched the stepsisters exchange tense glances. The two were as different as light and shadow: Anastasia vivacious, sparkling—Arella quiet, retiring. Anastasia would never understand why Arella hated these functions, and Arella would never understand why Anastasia loved them. Drusilla, her personality falling somewhere between these polar opposites, had always acted as the buffer, doing her best to understand both of her little sisters and keep the peace.

“I just . . . don’t want to meet him. That’s all,” Arella finally answered, her face revealing her discomfort. “Maybe you could tell them I’m ill? Or travelling to visit relations?”

“You should know better than to lie,” said the duchess. Her brow furrowed in concern, and she placed a gentle hand on Arella’s forehead. “Are you truly ill, child?”

“No, I’m feeling well, Stepmother,” Arella admitted. “I just don’t like balls.”

“You are an aristocrat, and as such you are not always allowed to act according to your likes or dislikes. You are expected to attend, and attend you will. I cannot permit you to behave in a selfish and rude manner, Arella. Such would not be a credit to your father.”

“Yes, Stepmother,” Arella murmured, her downcast eyes filling with tears. Drusilla, always observant, saw that telltale glimmer and wondered. Did the mention of Arella’s father cause this sudden sorrow? Or was the poor girl simply upset about not getting her own way? There was no way to know for certain. Even Drusilla struggled to interpret Arella’s reticent moods.

The duchess gazed upon her stepdaughter with a mixture of compassion and exasperation. “There, there, child! It can’t be as bad as that. After all, it will be the grandest occasion in many years. The royal family will spare no expense. Foreign nobles and dignitaries from across the world will be in attendance.”

Arella didn’t seem in the least cheered by this prospect.

“We shall all have new dresses! Lovelier dresses than we have ever had.”

Arella’s forlorn face remained unimpressed.

“And we shall take a silver coach, with our finest horses.”

No response.

“And footmen!”

Still nothing. What did the child want? The duchess shook her head. “Very well. If it is this distressing to you, I shall allow you to leave at midnight—but no sooner. And then only if you promise me to do your best to be pleasant to the prince and the nobles. Agreed?”

“Yes, Stepmother,” Arella whispered.



At least Stepmother had approved the notion of Arella’s making her own dress. This was some consolation. Arella sat on the floor of the dusty attic among boxes and trunks, remembering her conversation with the duchess that morning.

“You don’t want to go to the dressmaker’s with us?” Duchess Germaine had asked in surprise.

“I’d rather wear one of my mother’s dresses,” Arella had implored. “I’ll make it over so it won’t look too old-fashioned.”

The duchess had bowed her head. All these years, and she still didn’t understand this girl. “You can wear your mother’s gowns anytime. This is a special occasion. Don’t you want something new, something that will look like all the other girls?”

“No,” Arella had replied.

Duchess Germaine, tired of fighting, had conceded. It had been hard enough to convince the girl to go to the ball in the first place. Arella was so beautiful that it wouldn’t matter if she wasn’t dressed in the latest fashion, and perhaps if she wore one of her mother’s gowns she would feel more comfortable. “Very well. Would you like to accompany us to help your sisters pick out their gowns?”

“If I’m going to make my own, I should probably start working on it.”

“Very well,” the Duchess had said again, sighing a little in resignation. “Drusilla, Anastasia, and I are leaving now, dear. We shall return by suppertime.”

Now Arella was rummaging in the attic, accompanied only by one of her lively kittens. She loved the smell of her mother’s things: lavender from the sachets tucked among the clothing,

leather from the ornate trunks, a nearly imperceptible sweetness . . . Was it her mother's old perfume? She pulled out dress after dress, inhaling deeply with each one. Too much lace. Too bright. Too antiquated . . .

Ah! This one would do.

The rose-colored gown she held was simple, elegant enough to blend in with the fine apparel worn at a royal ball, yet not flashy enough to attract undue attention. Scrutinizing it carefully, Arella decided her mother had probably worn it as a breakfast gown. Such had been the fashion back then.

Arella smiled. "You probably didn't guess your daughter would wear it to the crown prince's royal ball," she whispered. She rubbed the smooth fabric absentmindedly. Was this one of her mother's favorites? Had her father liked to see her mother wearing it? Arella closed her eyes, trying to conjure an image of her mother in this dress, trying to find a memory.

None came. The only face she could see was the one from the portrait hanging in her bedroom.

Arella carefully repacked the long gowns in the old dusty trunk then picked up the selected gown and descended the attic stairs. "A little sash and some lace at the bottom should do to make this appropriate for the ball," Arella decided. She made her way to the sewing room and set to work. If she had to go, she may as well wear something she liked.



"What do you think?" Drusilla asked her mother and sister, holding the smooth silk up to her body. She hoped the pale green would lend some of its color to her murky eyes and soften the brightness of her red hair. Surveying herself in the mirror, she ruefully admitted that they were as murky and red, respectively, as ever.

"I like it," Anastasia answered. "It brings out the green in your eyes."

Drusilla glanced at her doubtfully. "Really? I didn't think it helped much."

"Try the darker green," her mother suggested. "I think it would suit your complexion better." The duchess handed her eldest daughter a different length of silk.

She nodded approvingly as Drusilla held up the new piece. “Very becoming. I think you should choose this one.”

Anastasia and the dressmaker echoed the duchess’s commendation. Drusilla wrinkled her nose at the reflection; nothing seemed to be particularly becoming. But if her mother and sister liked it . . . “All right then.” Drusilla shrugged. “Dark green it is.”

“Very well, my lady,” said the dressmaker, taking the silk and placing it with the lavender Anastasia had already selected. “And how would you want them made?”

“Ball gowns for the prince’s ball,” Duchess Germaine responded. “Make them according to the latest fashions—full skirt, bustle, plenty of lace. After all, this is the event of the year. Perhaps of the decade!” She smiled brightly at her girls. New dresses never ceased to be exciting.

Except to Arella.

The Duchess’s smile faded somewhat as she thought of her stepdaughter. Of course, it was understandable that the girl would like to wear her mother’s things. Though Duchess Germaine had tried to take a mother’s place in the girl’s heart, Arella always maintained a quiet shell, especially after the duke passed away—scarcely a year after he and Germaine were married, when Arella was still so young.

Drusilla noticed when her mother’s smile slipped and knew she was worrying about Arella again. That girl! She could have come to the dressmaker’s with them today and found a bright blue to match her clear eyes. She could have at least come and helped them to select their silks.

Instead, she was by herself in a dusty attic and would probably pick the simplest dress she could find. It didn’t matter too much—she was a beautiful girl, and a plain dress would not conceal that fact from the prince. Still, it would be nice if she could try to be involved with her family for a change.

Drusilla smiled at her mother, hoping to ease her worry. “And what about you, Mother? Shan’t you have a new dress for the ball? It is the event of the decade, after all.”

Duchess Germaine returned her daughter’s smile. “One of last year’s dresses will do nicely for me. *I* am not being evaluated for the prince’s bride!”

*Neither am I, thought Drusilla behind her smile. Nor anyone else's bride, for that matter.* “But think, Mother,” she replied brightly, “of all the nobility who will be there! You don't want to be the only one in last season's dress, do you?”

Anastasia added her voice. “Oh, do get a new dress with us, Mother. It would be such fun! And here's a silk that would look perfect with your complexion.” She held up a pale peach fabric.

The Duchess laughed. “Goodness, child, I am much too old to wear that shade! But I think—yes, I shall have a new dress.” She indicated a sophisticated silver. “If you please, Mrs. Montgomery. And while we're here, I shall order one for Arella—this blue matches her eyes so well. Perhaps she has changed her mind and would like a new dress after all. We'll surprise her.”



Drusilla tapped gently on the half-open door then poked her head through. “Arella?” she called.

“Come in,” replied her stepsister's gentle voice. Arella looked up from where she sat on a low stool surrounded by dull pink silk. One fluffy gray kitten napped on a chair near her while another pawed a spool of thread on the floor. “Did you need something?”

“No,” Drusilla answered. She picked up the sleeping kitten and sat down. The little furry bundle curled up in her lap and fell immediately back to sleep. “I just came to see how you were getting along.”

“Oh,” Arella responded, focusing on her work. “Quite well, thank you. Did you have a nice outing?”

“It was very nice. Bustles are still in style, but sleeves have changed considerably. Apparently long sleeves are horrid now.” Drusilla smiled at her stepsister. “Not that it makes any difference to you.”

“Not much,” admitted Arella. “I've never liked bustles. But I never liked those long sleeves, either. They got in the way.”

“Did you need any help? A thread-snipper? Errand-runner? Someone to amuse you?” Drusilla asked cheerfully, stroking the drowsy kitten.

Arella smiled but shook her head. “No, thank you. I have everything I need here, and there really isn’t much to do.”

Drusilla watched her stepsister’s nimble fingers move deftly through the layers of fabric. “Is that one of your mother’s dresses?” she inquired, more to make conversation than anything else.

“Yes,” Arella replied. “I think it’s lovely.”

“It is,” agreed Drusilla, admiring what she could see of the gown draped over Arella’s lap. The first Duchess of Abendroth must have been a woman of no mean taste; each of her dresses was costly and impeccably designed. This one, though simply cut, was no different. “What are you doing to it?”

“I’m just adding a little ruffle to the bottom. And I’ll make a sash.”

“No bustle?” Drusilla teased.

“No bustle,” Arella answered. Considering a moment, she added doubtfully, “Do you think Stepmother will approve?”

*Approve? Or understand?* Drusilla thought. She paused before replying. “I think she wants you to feel comfortable.” Their eyes met—Arella’s blue, lovely, innocent; Drusilla’s hazel, kindly, wise.

Arella nodded. “Do you think it will stand out if I don’t?”

“You, my dear sister, stand out wherever you go and however you dress. So wear what you want.”

Arella sighed. “I wish it were a masquerade,” she said. “Costumes are much more interesting.”

“You forget the purpose of this ball,” Drusilla replied with a small laugh. “I believe the prince is trying to find a beautiful girl to make his wife. Masks would scarcely help him in that endeavor.”

Arella made a face. “It’s silly that I have to go then. I wouldn’t marry him even if he wanted me to.”

“You haven’t met him,” Drusilla said, arching a brow. “Perhaps he will sweep you off your feet with charm.”

“He won’t.”

“If you say so.”

A silence lingered in the room for some moments. Realizing there was nothing more to be had from her quiet stepsister, Drusilla rose. “I suppose I’ll give Sleepy his chair back, then.” She replaced the kitten on the chair, planted a quick kiss on Arella’s head, and left the room.

Arella watched Drusilla go. And she thought, *No prince will sweep me off my feet. No one can.*



Seated in his mother’s sitting room, Prince Frederick listened half-heartedly to the queen reading the list of eligible females who would be attending his royal ball. He had finished his education and was about to celebrate his twentieth birthday. Therefore, according to precedent, he must marry. And his bride would be found among the noble young ladies dancing in the castle two weeks from now.

“Princess Miranda—a good match, but not exceptional. Her father’s kingdom is too small to be a useful ally. Alice, daughter of the Duke of Stelstek—sickly constitution. Amala de Perperand’s family isn’t old money. Oh, the daughter of the Emperor of Verdemons! She would be an excellent choice.”

The prince listened to the seemingly endless list of names and descriptions, but none struck his fancy. The ridiculous thought crossed his mind that this process was like buying a horse. Except, unlike a horse, the woman he chose would stay with him for the rest of his life. The woman he chose would have the power to make him happy or miserable. The power to make his reign—his entire kingdom, even—strong or weak.

He sighed.

Queen Thalia looked up from her lists and raised her delicate eyebrows. “I am not wearying you, son?” Her voice, cultured and melodious, held the faintest hint of reprimand.

“Of course not, Mother,” Frederick quickly reassured her. “I was just wondering what my life will be like if I pick the wrong one.” He drummed his fingers nervously on his leg.

“Don’t pick the wrong one, then,” his mother replied calmly.

Frederick half smiled but without amusement. “Out of so many? How will I know?”

“My son, when you marry, you take not only a bride but also a queen. Make sure she is worthy to be queen.” Queen Thalia returned her gaze to her lists, ready to pick up where she had been interrupted. “Lady Anna von Dalber, reputed to be very pretty. Elissa Galott, daughter of the Earl of Middlefield . . .”

Frederick found this advice scarcely helpful, but his mother was not a woman one questioned twice. Apparently she believed this information ought to be enough for him. *A woman worthy of being queen.* He tightened his jaw. Challenge it may be, but Frederick had never been known to back down from a challenge. He would find her.

*End of Sample*

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