



Ophelia's Muse

Rita Cameron

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"I'll never want to draw anyone else but you. You are my muse. Without you there is no art in me."

With her pale, luminous skin and cloud of copper-colored hair, nineteen-year-old Lizzie Siddal looks nothing like the rosy-cheeked ideal of Victorian beauty. Working in a London milliner's shop, Lizzie stitches elegant bonnets destined for wealthier young women, until a chance meeting brings her to the attention of painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Enchanted both by her ethereal appearance and her artistic ambitions--quite out of place for a shop girl--Rossetti draws her into his glittering world of salons and bohemian soirees.

Lizzie begins to sit for some of the most celebrated members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, posing for John Everett Millais as Shakespeare's Ophelia, for William Holman Hunt--and especially for Rossetti, who immortalizes her in countless paintings as his namesake's beloved Beatrice. The passionate visions Rossetti creates on canvas are echoed in their intense affair. But while Lizzie strives to establish herself as a painter and poet in her own right, betrayal, illness, and addiction leave her struggling to save her marriage and her sense of self.

Rita Cameron weaves historical figures and vivid details into a complex, unconventional love story, giving voice to one of the most influential yet overlooked figures of a fascinating era--a woman who is both artist and inspiration, long gazed upon, but until now, never fully seen.

An excerpt from Ophelia's Muse

Rossetti stood behind the canvas, pretending to study Deverell's painting while he admired its model. Despite Deverell's enthusiastic descriptions, Rossetti was completely unprepared for the glorious woman before him. She seemed to be from another age, as if she had sprung to life from an antique painting of an Italian saint. Seated before the window, her hair cast a slight golden glow in the afternoon sun, like a halo. She could not have been more perfect if he had sculpted her from marble with his own hands. Deverell claimed that he had found the perfect Viola, but this girl was far too beautiful to pose as some love-sick page. She was clearly meant to sit for the great heroines of history and myth, and Rossetti vowed to paint her as a queen.

"Miss Siddal, has anyone ever told you that you were surely crafted by the gods in order to be painted? If you don't believe that yours is a beauty for the ages, you underestimate yourself."

The force of his words struck Lizzie, and she wondered if he was serious, and if it could be true. Was this the thing that she had always been waiting for? Was she really meant to inspire great artists? Her head buzzed with the possibility, but the very allure of the idea felt dangerous...

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