



# How To Seduce A Wife

**Author:** *Kate Pearce*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Louisa Marchs new husband, Nicholas, is a perfect gentleman in bedmuch to her disappointment. She longs for the kind of fevered passion found in romance novels.

But when she dares him to seduce her properly, she discovers Nicholas is more than ready to meet her challenge....

**Total Pages (Source):** 7

## CHAPTER ONE

LONDON, 1816

“That will be all, Parsons, thank you.”

Nicholas March, the eighth Earl of Stortford, nodded at his valet and re-tied the sash of his brown silk dressing gown. He waited until Parsons had left the room and then strolled across to the internal door that connected his bedroom to the dressing area between him and his wife.

Light shone under Louisa’s closed door, and he smiled. It wasn’t that late. He’d even remembered to send word to his wife to ask her if it would be convenient for him to visit. He was punctilious like that, tried to respect Louisa in ways his father had never done with his mother. She would have no cause to complain about his boorish manners or his drunken outbursts. No fears that he would openly demean her in public.

His marriage was going to be a pattern card of respectability. Nicholas found himself sighing as he tapped on the door. It was harder than he had imagined to abandon his rakish bachelor ways and treat his wife as a lady should be treated: with respect, gentleness, and forbearance—especially in the marital bed. He knocked again. “My lady?”

There was no answer, and he frowned and tried the door handle. It opened easily and he stepped inside the room. The bed was empty, the tasteful silver and blue drapes he’d chosen for his new bride drawn back, the satin coverlet undisturbed. Nicholas

looked around the large cozy space. His wife of almost one year sat curled up in a chair by the fireside, her bare feet tucked under her and her brown hair neatly braided for bed. A pair of spectacles balanced on the narrow bridge of her nose as she read intently from a leather-bound book.

She wasn't beautiful. Nicholas hadn't chosen her for her looks, but she had a lovely smile and warm brown eyes the color of toffee. He'd been attracted by her quiet demeanor, her obvious intelligence, and, to be perfectly frank, the size of her dowry. Her family was on the up, her father one of the new industrialists willing to pay to hoist his daughter even higher.

He'd met Louisa at one of his older sister's interminable parties, and she'd made no effort to capture his interest. That alone had guaranteed his. It hadn't taken him long to persuade her to marry him with both families' avid support.

She still hadn't noticed him. He cleared his throat. "My lady?"

She held up one finger as if he were a servant or a child interrupting her, and didn't look up. Nicholas moved closer until his shadow blocked the candlelight. With a martyred sigh, Louisa raised her gaze to his face. He swept her a bow.

"Am I interrupting?"

She took her spectacles off and regarded him seriously for a long moment. "Yes, you are." She gestured at the book she held. "Couldn't you see that I was reading?"

For a moment Nicholas stiffened. She'd known he was coming. Why wasn't she in bed waiting for him like a good wife should be? His ready sense of humor resurfaced, and he found himself smiling at his own conceit.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I thought you were expecting me."

She glanced at the clock and jumped. “Oh, my goodness! You did say you would be visiting my bed this evening, didn’t you.”

Nicholas’s good humor faltered again. “You don’t sound very pleased about that.”

She bit her lip and slowly shut the book with a longing look. “It’s just that this novel I’m reading is so exciting. The pirate king has taken the heroine on his ship and is threatening to ravish her if she doesn’t reveal the secrets of her family’s hidden treasure.” She sighed and hugged the book to her bosom. “It was so diverting, I could hardly put it down.”

“It sounds like the sort of book that should be put down the drain.” He realized he sounded quite caustic. Good Lord, was he jealous of a book?

“It’s a love story.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Exactly. Who reads such unrealistic drivel?”

She raised her chin at him. “I do, and I enjoy such books excessively .”

“So I can see.” He simply looked at her. A flush rose on her cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I’ll get into bed immediately.”

He waited as Louisa rose to her feet and placed the book on the small table beside her chair. She walked across to the bed with all the enthusiasm of a child going off to receive a beating. Nicholas stared after her. Was he really so unwelcome?

“I can leave if you are tired.”

She turned to look at him as she shrugged out of her dressing gown and summoned a

wan smile. “No, that’s all right. You are here now; you might as well get on with it.”

He strolled toward her, aware of the thrust of her nipples beneath her simple white nightgown. “If it won’t inconvenience you too greatly.”

She climbed onto the bed, giving him a glimpse of long pale legs and the rounded curves of her buttocks. “I know my duty, my lord.”

He sat on the edge of the bed until she was completely under the bedclothes. He blew out the candles around the bed and stripped off his dressing gown. Despite his reservations, his cock was erect and also ready to do its duty. With a sigh, he carefully folded back her nightgown and fitted himself between her thighs.

She didn’t protest his presence, but she didn’t seem to welcome him, either. With sudden resolve, he grabbed her hands and linked them behind his neck. She could at least hold him while he made love to her, make him feel like more than a beast ravishing an innocent.

Her cold fingers settled against his skin, and he nudged at the entrance to her sex with his cock. She wasn’t wet for him. Did ladies ever get wet with desire? Was that why his father had strayed? He shoved that thought out of his head as he eased his aching cock inside her tight passage. Her fingernails dug into his flesh, and he tried to move more slowly. Was he hurting her? If he asked, he knew she would deny it.

With exquisite care he began to move, tried to keep his weight off her to minimize the effect of his thrusts and save her from his more aggressive instincts. He sensed her move her head to one side and opened his eyes. She was staring over at the fireplace where her book lay. He went still.

“Louisa, am I boring you?”

Her gaze flew back to his and he saw it there, saw the truth. “No, my lord, I...”

He thrust himself deep twice and came fast, the sensation almost as unsatisfying as his own hand. He stayed where he was, braced over her, and waited until she looked at him again.

“Perhaps I should apologize again for distracting you from your book. It is obviously far more important than I am.”

He probably sounded petulant, but her inattention had wounded his manly pride. She bit down on her lip and tried to shake her head.

“I’m sorry, my lord.”

With a groan, he eased out of her but he didn’t leave the bed. “Why is the book more interesting than I am?” He gestured at the marble-covered tome. “Would you prefer the hero of your ridiculous novel to be here in your bed rather than your legal husband?”

She pushed down her nightgown and sat up, her brown eyes glinting with tears. “Perhaps I would. At least he seems to enjoy ravishing the heroine!”

Nicholas stared at her for a long moment. “You wish to be ravished?”

“I wish...” She sighed and looked down at her clenched hands. “I expected...”

“What?” He was determined to have this out now, to have perhaps, the first honest conversation of his married life. “You can tell me.”

She hunched her shoulder at him. “My mother told me I was not to bother you with my feelings or thoughts. She said that men are not interested in such matters.”

“ I am interested.”

“Are you sure?”

“Indeed. Otherwise why else would I still be sitting here asking why you prefer the hero of a gothic novel to a real live man in your bed?”

“My mother also said that men’s feelings are often hurt if a woman criticizes them.”

“That is true, but I am made of sterner stuff. I am quite willing to hear your thoughts on this matter.” He found he was glaring at her, but she didn’t shrink away. “We are bound together for life; don’t you think that a little sincere communication between us might be a good thing?”

“I suppose so.”

“Well?”

She peeked at him from under her long eyelashes. “Are you sure that you won’t get angry?”

He sketched a cross over his chest. “I swear it. Now tell me what the problem is.”

“I thought that marriage would be more... exciting.”

“I do not excite you?”

“You are all that a gentleman should be. You are kind and pleasant and good natured, but...”

“But what?”

She studied him dubiously. “You sound as if you are getting annoyed. Perhaps I should stop.”

He set his jaw and forced a smile. “No, please go on.”

“I thought, I hoped, that when we were alone together we would become closer and more intimate.”

“You wish me to spend more time with you?” She nodded. “I can do that. I assumed that like most ladies of my acquaintance you wouldn’t want me around interfering with your social life.”

“It’s not just that.” She wrapped her arms around her drawn-up knees and leaned back against the headboard, her long braid hung over her right shoulder. She smoothed the sheets with one hand, her slight northern accent more apparent than usual. “After the way you kissed me during our courtship I thought that being bedded by you would be wonderful.”

For a second he struggled to find words. He was a renowned lover! Women fought over the right to share his bed or to be seen in his company. He opened his mouth and then shut it again, and finally forced out: “I beg your pardon?”

Louisa sighed. “I knew you wouldn’t want to hear that. My mother was right. Men are definitely more fragile than women.”

“What exactly were you expecting to happen in our marital bed, my lady?”

“I expected pleasure.” She raised her head and met his heated gaze. “Was I wrong to expect that?”

“And how am I supposed to give you pleasure when all your attention is fixed on that



damned book?”

“That is hardly fair. I only started reading the book tonight. I hoped it would help ready me for your appearance.”

“So that you could imagine the pirate hero in my place?”

“Perhaps.”

He held her gaze, his own frosty. “Am I so inadequate as a lover, then, ma’am?”

She regarded him seriously. “I don’t know. Are you?”

He got off the bed and retrieved his dressing gown, took his time putting it on and tying the sash. “Perhaps I was trying to be considerate, ma’am. Perhaps I assumed that as a young untried lady you would appreciate my restraint .”

She swallowed hard and then lifted her chin at him. “If you are suggesting it is my fault, I accept that. I do not have the experience you do, that is true. I do not know how to please a man.”

He stared at her and then bowed. “Good night, ma’am. I’ll leave you to your pirate.”

She nodded back at him, her back as straight as the queen’s and her expression just as serene. “I knew you’d react like this. My mother was right.”

He headed for the door. “And how nice for you that your mother is always right. It must be such a great comfort.”

“No.” He turned around and saw her hastily wiping away a tear “It isn’t. Good night, my lord.”

Nicholas placed his palm on the dressing room door and stared at the ornately carved panel. He was acting like a fool, running away like a cockerel that had lost a fight. Louisa was his wife. He owed it to both of them to try to resolve this issue. With a soft curse he turned back, only to see his wife resettle herself in bed with the damned book.

He wrenched open the door and allowed it to slam shut behind him. He hoped it made her jump and lose her place.

\* \* \*

Louisa winced as the door shut with a definite bang. She should never have started that conversation. Apparently, her mother was right about men being fragile little flowers where matters of their sexual prowess were concerned. Nicholas was furious with her. But at least he'd shown her some emotion other than his usual smiling politeness. Although she'd been slightly afraid, she'd almost enjoyed the experience. She'd half-hoped that he would take her back into his arms and make love to her with all the dash and daring of the pirate hero.

But it was not to be. Louisa put her book down and pulled up the sheets. Between her thighs she was both sore and wet from Nicholas's five-minute possession of her body. She curled up into a ball. Before their marriage she'd heard so many erotic rumors about him that the prospect of being his wife had half-terrified her. She hadn't expected to be reduced to reading gothic romance novels simply to endure his regular weekly appearances in her bed.

There had to be something more... Louisa blinked away a few tears and stared up at the silver and blue canopy above her bed. Would he stay away from her now for good, or would he display the good sense she knew he had and think about what she'd said and how to resolve it? One never knew with a man, particularly a husband. They were peculiar creatures, but she'd hoped for so much more with Nicholas.

When she'd met him, he'd seemed like the embodiment of all her dreams and longings, and he'd liked her back. Or so she had thought until they were married and he treated her with all the warm politeness of a distant acquaintance. She knew he'd married her for her money, she wasn't that naive, but she'd also thought there had been something between them...

Maybe Nicholas was right and she was too inexperienced to know what she wanted after all.

With a determined sigh, Louisa closed her eyes. At least she'd told him what was wrong. How he reacted to her comments was now up to him. If he chose to ignore her pleas, what would he do next? Send her away to the countryside and set up a mistress in Town?

Louisa clutched at the sheets and whispered a prayer. Surely he wouldn't go that far. He had always treated her with the greatest of respect both in public and in private. She swallowed down a sudden urge to cry. Perhaps she was naive but she didn't want to be respected in bed. She wanted to be loved...

### CHAPTER TWO

With extreme trepidation, Louisa opened the door to the breakfast parlor. It was only eight in the morning, and she hoped to catch her husband before he went about his daily business. Not that she knew quite what he did all day, only that he was rarely home, leaving her to her own devices. The smell of coffee, sausages, and toast assailed her nostrils, and her stomach growled.

Louisa slapped a hand over her stomach and felt herself start to blush. At the table, the newspaper twitched to one side to reveal her husband's startled face. Nicholas rose to his feet and bowed. He was dressed in a brown coat, buckskin breeches, and top boots as if he intended to go riding. "Good morning, my dear."

"Good morning, my lord."

Before he could come around the table to aid her, she slipped into a chair opposite him and sat down with an audible thump. The solitary footman poured her some tea and provided her with her usual plate of toast and marmalade. She glanced at the back of the newspaper, but there was no further sign of Nicholas.

Louisa nibbled her toast and sipped her tea, the sounds loud in the quiet of the sunny breakfast room. Eventually, she sighed so hard that the pages of the Times buckled inward. A moment later, Nicholas's face appeared.

"Is there something you wish to discuss with me, my lady?"

Despite the fact that he was smiling, there was none of the genial warmth that

normally filled his blue eyes when he spoke to her. She swallowed hard and only succeeded in choking on her toast. By the time she finished coughing, Nicholas had dismissed the footman and put down his paper.

“I wish to apologize, my lord.”

He raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

She made a helpless gesture. “I should never have spoken to you so openly. My mother insisted that I should never disagree with you. Apparently men don’t like their wives to think for themselves or have an opinion about anything, let alone the delicate topic of marital relations.”

A smile flickered at the corner of his generous mouth. “Indeed.”

She tried to look apologetic. “If we could just go back to the way things were? I promise I’ll keep my immodest opinions to myself and simply agree with everything you say.”

He frowned. “But I don’t think I’d like that at all.”

“Are you sure? Most men seem to like it, although in my opinion, if that is all they require in a wife, they might as well purchase a parrot.”

A dimple appeared on Nicholas’s cheek, and Louisa clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, I’m so sorry and after I promised to keep quiet.”

He regarded her seriously. “I can’t see how we can go back to where we were, and, to be honest, would you want to? If I can counter your honesty with some of my own, I confess I haven’t exactly looked forward to sharing your bed.”

“Oh.” Louisa folded her napkin and looked down at the toast crumbs scattered over the pristine white linen tablecloth. She jumped as Nicholas reached across the table and grasped her hand.

“Louisa, we can do better than this, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure, my lord. What exactly do you require me to do?”

“To start with, you can stop pretending you no longer have an opinion of your own. I’m quite sure you do.” He hesitated. “I’m not that much of an ogre am I?”

She looked up at him then. “No, not at all, you have always treated me with respect and kindness and...”

He squeezed her hand. “And I always will, but perhaps I have been at fault.”

She blinked at him. Her father had never uttered those words to her mother, of that she was certain. “ You have been at fault?”

His charming smile flittered across his face. “Don’t sound so surprised. I’ve been thinking about what you said to me last night.”

“Really?”

“Indeed.” He released her and sat back, his other hand now curved around his coffee cup. “Mayhap I have neglected you after all.”

Louisa went still. What had she roused with her impudent questioning? Her mother had always said her quick tongue would be her downfall.

“In truth, you have offered me an interesting challenge. How should a man seduce his

own wife?”

“I have no idea, sir.”

His gaze was full of sensual intent, and he patted her hand. “Perhaps I should start by reading that gothic novel you were so enamored of. Do you have it with you?”

Color heated her cheeks, and she snatched her hand back. “I scarcely think you would enjoy it, sir, or that I would really wish to be manhandled in such a rough and ungentlemanly way.”

“Would you not? Yet you seemed quite enthused by the novel.”

Louisa bit down on her lip. “I’m not sure what you mean, my lord.”

He leaned forward, his elbow propped on the table, his chin resting in his hand. “Did the story make you feel... restless and excited?”

“It certainly increased the rate of my heartbeat, sir, and I confess that I felt a little strange and overheated after reading it.”

“That’s good.”

“But what does that have to do with what passes between us in bed?”

His smile was slow and raised all her feminine suspicions. “Therein lies the problem.”

“I do not understand you, sir.”

He rose to his feet. “You will.”

“You intend to make me feel those heated emotions for, for you?”

He bowed. “Why not? I’m certain I can inspire the same feelings in you.”

Unaccustomed annoyance crowded her chest. “I do not wish to know about your previous conquests or experience, sir. And I doubt that you can inspire such insipid devotion in me.”

“There’s nothing insipid about it, my dear.” He smiled again. “You’ll just have to trust that I am man enough for the challenge, won’t you?”

Louisa got to her feet, too. “What challenge?”

“How to seduce a wife.” He bowed low. “I believe I’m quite looking forward to it.”

“And what are the stakes, sir? What do you win?”

He went still and stared down at her. “A wife who doesn’t have to read gothic novels to experience the pleasures of love? A willing bed partner? Surely, I cannot lose.”

Before she could answer he exited the breakfast room, leaving her standing there clutching a hand to her chest. A sudden qualm assailed her. What if she proved incapable of being seduced? She prided herself on her calm good sense, not her ability to drive a man to his knees with lust. What if she didn’t have the capability to enjoy passion?

She gazed after her husband and then sank back down into her seat. Her plans for a quiet morning at home were upset by the strength of the emotions Nicholas aroused in her. She had to talk to someone about this most delicate of matters, and who better than her husband’s oh-so-sophisticated sister, April?



Louisa finished off her tea and rose to her feet. She needed help, and she wasn't afraid to ask for it. She paused at the bottom of the stairs as the clock struck the half hour. April was part of the family; Nicholas could hardly object to Louisa consulting her, could he? She grimaced as she mounted the stairs. Well, perhaps he could, but there was no alternative. She scarcely knew another soul in Town and she was not going to ask her mother about anything ever again.

\* \* \*

Nicholas handed his hat and gloves to the doorman at his club and went inside. At such an early hour, there were very few gentlemen in the smoky oak-paneled rooms, so he took possession of the best seat by the roaring fire. Despite the cold, he'd enjoyed his ride. It had afforded him the opportunity to think about his wife and how best to initiate her into the joys of marital intercourse.

He found himself smiling as he pictured her face at the breakfast table that morning, her horror that her uninhibited discussion about his failings as a husband had inspired him to seduce her. He stared into the flames. But how to approach such a complex matter? How could he help her understand her sexuality without frightening her?

"Good morning, Lord Stortford."

Nicholas smiled up at one of his oldest friends. "Good morning, Captain Gray. Will you join me for a glass of brandy or something warmer?"

"Mulled wine would be welcome on a day like this." Captain Gray took the seat opposite Nicholas and rubbed his hands together. "I walked up from my lodgings, and it was far colder than I anticipated."

Nicholas beckoned to a waiter and gave him the captain's order. "And that from a man who has sailed the seven seas, and survived, means it must be cold."

Captain Gray smiled. “Or I’ve become soft, chained to a desk since the war ended. That is another distinct possibility.” He smoothed a hand over his windblown blond hair that was tied back in an old-fashioned queue. “What are you doing out and about so early?”

Nicholas shrugged. “I took my new horse out for a gallop.”

“Despite the cold?” Captain Gray looked impressed.

“You’ve never struck me as an early riser, but perhaps marriage has reformed you.”

“In truth, thoughts of my wife did propel me out of my front door this morning before I’d really noticed the foulness of the weather.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve taken to battling over the breakfast table.”

Nicholas sighed. “Not exactly.”

Captain Gray lowered his voice. “I say, Nick, is everything all right?”

“Everything is fine, David, it’s just that...”

“Marriage is harder than you thought it would be.”

“That is certainly part of it.” Nicholas frowned. “Although how you would know that, I have no notion.”

“Just because I’m not married doesn’t mean I haven’t excellent powers of observation and decided opinions as to the wedded state.”

“Really.”

David shrugged. “And I’m quite willing to listen.”

“I’m sure you are.” Nicholas regarded David warily. “I’m not sure if I’m willing to indulge you.”

“You don’t have to.” David crossed one booted foot over the other and settled more comfortably into the chair. “But I am one of your oldest friends, and I promise I won’t spread any gossip.”

“I know that.” Nicholas kept quiet as the waiter offered David a tall glass of steaming mulled wine and refilled Nicholas’s coffee cup. “It’s just that the situation is a little complicated.”

David blew on the ruby-colored wine and then sipped it. The scent of cinnamon and cloves drifted across to Nicholas. “I like your wife. She seems intelligent and kind.”

“She is.”

“In fact, I was quite surprised you chose her.”

Nicholas stiffened. “What did you expect me to choose? A flashy debutante with no money and a big chest?”

David chuckled. “Not at all. After your father’s appalling example, I knew you’d be careful.”

“My father was no example to me.”

“Yet, there was a time when you emulated him.”

“Until I grew old enough to know better and realize that I had no desire to turn into

an elderly pox-ridden lothario.”

There was a short silence as David seemed to reflect on Nicholas’s outburst.

“What made you change your mind about him?”

Nicholas forced a smile. “When I saw how he treated my mother, and how he forced her to deal publicly with his mistresses and his bastards.”

“Ah.”

“What does that mean? And what does this have to do with your interest in my choice of a wife?”

David sat forward, his glass cradled in his hands. “Because I now understand why you chose her. She doesn’t come from an aristocratic family with no morals, and that makes her more attractive to you.”

“That’s true, but...”

“Which means that you hope she’ll remain as faithful to you as you intend to remain to her.”

“I’ve never told you that.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it? You’ve been married for almost a year now, and I’ve heard no rumors of you frequenting any brothels, setting up a mistress, or enjoying yourself at Madame Helene’s.”

“Is there something wrong with a man wanting to keep his marriage vows?”

David's eyebrows rose. "Nothing at all. There's no need to sound so belligerent. It's actually quite refreshing."

"I don't intend to make a fool out of my wife. I intend to treat her with respect."

"And I salute you for that." David raised his glass and drank slowly. "But I'm sure such resolution brings its own problems."

"Why would you say that?"

"Nick, I've known you since Harrow; you like sex, you like it a lot."

"So?"

"So, going from your rakish ways to one woman and one woman alone must have provided you with some interesting challenges."

Nicholas sat back in his chair and studied his old friend. He had the perfect opportunity to ask for advice from one of the few men he'd ever trusted, but at what price? Only his pride and he wasn't that big a fool. "I find myself in a bit of a quandary."

"In what way?"

Nicholas glanced around the room and leaned closer to David. "My wife is quite innocent."

"I should imagine she is." David nodded as if Nicholas made perfect sense. "Does she find you a little 'overwhelming'?"

"She finds me boring enough that she'd rather read a gothic romance novel than

entertain me in her bed.”

David simply stared at him, a peculiar expression on his face. “Boring? You? One of the most sexually experienced men I’ve ever met?”

“Apparently, I fail to measure up to the exacting standards of the pirate hero from the gothic novel she is currently reading.”

David started to laugh, his sea-blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s the truth. I think my manly pride has been hurt.”

“I should say it has.” David studied him. “But what have you done, or not done, to make her feel like that?”

Nicholas shifted in his seat. “I’ve tried to treat her with respect and restraint, as I assumed one would treat the lady one has married.”

“Ah.”

Nicholas glowered at David. “Don’t say ‘ah’ again. It’s infuriating.”

“You assume that married ladies wish to be set on a shelf like a porcelain figurine and treated delicately, the way your father should’ve treated your mother. Am I right?”

Nicholas managed a nod.

“Women are not meant to be divided into categories, Nick. Wives can enjoy sex as well as mistresses.” David sat back and placed his glass on the table beside him.

Nicholas shoved a hand through his hair. “I’ve already worked that out for myself.

Now I just have to think of a way to fix it.”

“Fix what?”

Nicholas looked at David with a quelling stare. “Never you mind. You’ve merely confirmed my own decisions.”

“That’s good to know.” David nodded. “So you’ll be taking her to Madame Helene’s then.”

Nicholas stood and glared down at his infuriating friend. “Of course I will.”

David got up as well. “I’m sure you’ll find plenty of pirate heroes there.”

“Indeed.” Nicholas kept his face as blank as possible as he considered David’s outrageous suggestion. Madame Helene’s House of Pleasure catered to the sexual fantasies of the rich. He’d frequented her premises during his wilder days and had come to consider Madame Helene a friend. He wasn’t sure if his membership was still current. “Thanks for the advice, Captain Gray. Perhaps I’ll see you at Madame’s?”

David bowed. “I’ll keep an eye out for you.”

Nicholas nodded again and left, his thoughts in turmoil. David had proved as helpful as ever, and his suggestion of Madame Helene’s was inspired. Now all Nicholas had to do was go and visit Madame and find out if she would let him return to her exclusive establishment in Mayfair—with his far too innocent yet sexually frustrated wife.

### CHAPTER THREE

“So there I was, darling, stranded in the middle of the ballroom with that obnoxious little toad, Lord Monkfish, on his knees in front of me searching for his false teeth!”

Louisa smiled obediently at Lady April Fotherskill and glanced at the ornate gold clock on the marble mantelpiece. She’d been at her sister-in-law’s house for over an hour, and she still hadn’t managed a complete sentence. April stopped smiling and stared at her.

“You seem a little distracted today, Louisa. Is there something wrong?”

Louisa took a deep breath. “Well, not exactly, wrong, but...”

“Is it my brother? Has he been behaving himself?” April’s handkerchief fluttered in front of her prettily flushed oval face. “Nicholas promised me that he intended to behave perfectly toward you, not like Papa treated poor, dear Mama...”

“Nicholas always treats me with great respect, April. It’s not that, it’s just...”

“Are you breeding? Oh, my word, that would be exciting news! Or have you come to ask me if you are? I do have two children of my own.”

In desperation, Louisa gripped her hands tightly together on her lap. “No, I’m not breeding, at least I don’t think I am. I did want to ask you about something, though. Something quite personal.”



April's blue eyes, which were just like Nicholas's, met Louisa's. Beneath her artless chatter, Louisa had discovered April was no fool and that her affection for her younger brother ran deep and true.

"Is something wrong with Nicholas?"

"No, he's in perfect health. Please don't worry." Louisa groaned. "For someone who prides herself on her intelligence, I'm not making much sense, am I?"

"Not really." April leaned forward to pat Louisa's knee. "Tell me what the problem is. I promise I won't interrupt this time."

Louisa cleared her throat. All at once her idea of confiding in April seemed ludicrous. She wasn't sure how to approach such a delicate subject without implicating her husband. She had wit enough to realize that Nicholas might not appreciate his older sister being told he was inadequate in bed.

She managed an uncertain smile. "I wondered whether you would mind me asking you something about married life."

"Not at all! We're like sisters, aren't we?" April rose to her feet and linked her arm through Louisa's. "Let's go through into my bedchamber where we can have a comfortable coze without fear of being interrupted."

After another anxious glance at the clock, Louisa allowed herself to be drawn away into April's fragrant boudoir. The lemon-and-silver-colored walls and bed coverings seemed a trifle bright to Louisa, and the amount of lace and ruffles that adorned every surface made her a little claustrophobic. She much preferred her own blue bedchamber, which Nicholas had decorated for her as a surprise on their marriage.

She studied April's sympathetic face. She'd grown so used to asking April for advice

that she hadn't thought the matter through properly. How could she have imagined it possible to discuss such an intimate subject as her marital woes with her husband's sister? Now she'd have to think of something that didn't involve Nicholas at all.

But perhaps there was some more general information she could acquire...

"Well?" April inquired brightly as she sat next to Louisa on a small, yellow-striped chaise longue.

"It's just that, I haven't been married for very long and I wondered..." Louisa stopped talking and gazed at April, who made an encouraging gesture. "I wondered whether other women enjoy the more 'physical' side of marriage." She finished in a rush and felt her cheeks heat up.

"Oh, my dear, there is nothing to worry about," April said and patted her hand. "It is perfectly normal for you to enjoy that side of things, don't let anyone, particularly your mother, tell you any different. If you are lucky enough to have married a man like Nicholas, who had 'quite' a reputation as a young man, then why shouldn't you enjoy the benefit of his experience?"

"That's not quite..."

"I have to tell you, that despite his outward appearance, my Gilbert is a most satisfying companion between the sheets. That man knows passion and I'm a lucky woman because of it."

Louisa tried to picture the rather portly Lord Gilbert Fotherskill cavorting in bed and found herself wanting to giggle. April hugged her. "You see? There is nothing to worry about, just consider yourself lucky and pity other wives whose husbands don't know their way around a woman's body and couldn't care less anyway." She kissed Louisa's cheek. "And it is also normal if your husband wishes to make love with you

more than once a night and actually spends the whole night in your bed.”

“Really?” Louisa tried to imagine Nicholas sleeping with her all night long, and liked the idea, especially if he held her close.

The clock struck eleven and Louisa leaped to her feet. “I’m so sorry; I have to go, April. My mother is expecting me.”

April made a face. “She is always expecting you.”

Louisa forced a smile. “And I am always willing to indulge her. There aren’t many people here in Town she is comfortable with.”

“She is a bit of a fish out of water, isn’t she?” April got up, too. “I’m sorry you have to leave, but I do understand. My mother commands all my attention when she comes up to London as well.”

Louisa put on her bonnet. “I think she’d prefer to go back to Cheshire for good, but unfortunately, my father’s business interests keep him here for the majority of the year. She is too unsure of herself to make friends easily, and is quite terrified of you and Nicholas.”

“Terrified?”

“She sees you as ‘Quality’ and thus too far above her to be spoken to, and nothing I say or do can change that.” Louisa sighed. “Sometimes I’m sure she feels the same way about me, as if I’m a stranger to her, with my boarding school education and exacting standards.”

“I apologize, Louisa,” April murmured. “It was unkind of me to comment about your mother’s need for you in any way. She has always been very polite to me.”

“Thank you. And thank you for the tea and the advice.” Louisa kissed April’s cheek and pulled on her gloves. Her mother would worry if she was late, and that would make Louisa feel inadequate again. She wasn’t the daughter her mother wanted at all, with her aristocratic husband and her enlightened views. That had been all her father’s doing. He’d wanted the finest cachet that his money could buy his daughter—a title—and he reveled in it.

Louisa left April’s town house and stepped into the carriage that Nicholas had bought especially for her use. Her mother hadn’t seemed to care about her advancement, had, in fact, spent many hours telling Louisa not to get above herself and to be a meek and obedient wife. She stared out the window. And where had that got her? Into a situation where she’d had to confront her husband about his apparent lack of desire for her and take refuge in a work of fiction.

With a sigh, Louisa sat back and waited for the carriage to arrive in unfashionable Hans Town, where her mother still preferred to live. Despite her concerns, Louisa couldn’t help wondering what Nicholas planned to do to seduce her. He’d proven most efficient in his courtship of her, and she guessed he would pursue this new challenge just as adroitly. Thinking of Nicholas was a far more pleasurable subject than her mother’s scolding and might help her through yet another dreary afternoon.

\* \* \*

Nicholas paused at the entrance to the grand scarlet and gold salon on the first floor of Madame Helene’s House of Pleasure. A few guests were scattered around the vast space, but most of them appeared to be sleeping off the excesses of the previous night rather than engaging in amorous sexual activity.

One couple lay entwined in the large silk cushions beside the buffet. Both were naked, and the man was feeding his lover grapes and kissing her between each offering. Nicholas couldn’t help but admire the woman’s pert breasts and rounded

arse. He wondered whether he would ever be able to satisfy Louisa until she was as languid and glowing as the woman he'd just passed, to fuck her into satiated exhaustion...

His cock swelled at the thought of it. He hadn't even seen her completely naked, hadn't explored her body with the thoroughness she deserved, hadn't satisfied her at all . He was truly an appalling husband.

He'd had no problem being admitted into the pleasure house, so he assumed his credit was still good, but making sure of that with the lady proprietor was important. By the far wall he spotted Madame Helene in conversation with her butler. She wore a plain blue muslin dress, and her blond hair was braided away from her face, a direct contrast to the thin silk gowns and floating ringlets she normally displayed in the evenings. In truth, she looked like the businesswoman she obviously was rather than the flirtatious madam he was used to.

At the age of seventeen, his father had brought him to Madame's and insisted he experience everything the house had to offer. Luckily for him, Madame Helene had ignored his father's instructions, offered him excellent advice, and allowed him to find his own pleasures. In a strange way, he had come to consider her a friend.

"Madame?"

She turned and whisked a pair of spectacles from the end of her nose. "Good morning, Lord Stortford."

"If you have time, ma'am, I'd love to have a word."

Nicholas bowed as she handed a sheaf of notes over to her butler and then gave him her full attention. Her piercing blue eyes scanned him with quiet interest. "Of course. Would you like to come down to my office?"

He nodded his assent and followed her out of the salon. The naked couple on the silk pillows had finished eating and returned to lovemaking. The man moved over the woman with lazy ease, her heels locked together in the small of his back, her soft cries almost inaudible in the big room.

A wave of lust shuddered through Nicholas as he breathed in the scent of sex, perfume, and desire that always swirled around the pleasure house. He wanted this again. He needed it, and if the only way to achieve it was to find it with his wife, he was more than willing to try.

“Please sit down, my lord.”

Madame Helene waved Nicholas to a chair in front of her desk and sat herself, her hands folded together over a large ledger. “Now, how can I help you?”

“I was wondering if my membership was still current for your establishment.”

Madame Helene raised her eyebrows, and her smile died. “If my staff let you in, you are still a member. But I will check for you if you wish.”

She opened the large leather book in front of her and turned a few pages until she settled on one. “Ah, here you are. It seems you have another month left on this year’s membership.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I can only hope that will be sufficient.”

“For what, my lord?”

At the bite in her words, Nicholas looked up from contemplating his boots. “Do you think I’m up to no good, ma’am?”

She raised her chin at him. Helene had never been afraid to speak her mind, and Nicholas suspected she was going to speak it right now. “That is none of my business, sir, but I would respectfully remind you that you have been married for less than a year.”

“And you think I mean to resume my lascivious ways and abandon my wife? I wouldn’t be the first man within your establishment to enjoy another woman. Why are you being so judgmental? It’s not like you.”

“That’s not the point.” Helene’s eyes narrowed. “May I take this opportunity to inform you that a month is all you have? I don’t intend to offer you another year of membership, but, despite my reservations, I will honor this current one.”

He grinned at her. “You do think I’m up to no good.”

“It would appear so, and I confess to some disappointment.” Madame Helene took a deep breath. “I’ve known you for years, and, in truth, I thought better of you.”

“That is exactly what I wanted to speak to you about. I’m allowed to bring a guest with me, aren’t I?”

“You are, my lord.” Her blue eyes were frosty now, her posture rigid.

He sat back and watched her for a long moment, then drew a leather bound book out of his pocket and placed it on her desk. “Then you won’t object if I bring my wife. I believe you might be able to help us with something important.”

\* \* \*

By the time she reached home, Louisa had a terrible headache and a strange reluctance to do anything but crawl into her own bed and pull the bedclothes over her

head. She'd braved her husband over the breakfast table, misled his sister into thinking she was filled with marital bliss, and managed to endure a lecture from her mother as to her shortcomings as a daughter and a wife.

She walked up the stairs, trailing the ribbons of her bonnet behind her, and went straight to her bedchamber. Polly, her maid, was adding coal to the fire and stood to welcome Louisa back.

"Good afternoon, my lady. Would you like some tea?"

Louisa shuddered as she took off her pelisse and tossed her bonnet onto the nearest chair. "I've had enough tea to drown in today. Could you bring me a glass of brandy instead?"

Polly curtsied and deftly removed the pelisse and bonnet from where Louisa had flung them. "I'll see to that now, my lady, and then I'll start your bath. Are you dining at home this evening?"

"I believe so." Louisa took the chair next to the fire, kicked off her slippers, and curled her cold stockinged feet up on the seat. When Polly returned with her glass of brandy, Louisa took a long sip and felt the spirits burn a fiery path down to her stomach. She shivered and placed the glass on the small table beside her chair. The crystal chinked against her spectacles, and she picked them up and placed them on her nose, her hand delving down the side of the chair for her book.

With a frown she tried the other side of the chair. "Polly, did you move my book?"

"No, my lady. Which one was that?" Polly stood framed in the door to Louisa's dressing room where she was preparing her bath. "If I'd seen it, I would've put it on the table by your chair."



“The pirate novel I was telling you about.” Louisa climbed off the seat and upended the cushion, but there was no sign of the book. “I wonder where I put it?”

“Oh, I hope you find it, my lady. I can’t wait to hear what happens to that dastardly pirate!”

“Me neither,” murmured Louisa as a truly awful thought occurred to her. Had she merely misplaced it, or had Nicholas found it and decided to read it for himself? The idea made her simultaneously excited and scared. He would think her a feather-headed fool, just as her father did. A lowering thought when she’d tried so hard to convince Nicholas that she had a brain and was capable of discussing anything he wanted, anything at all.

“Your bath’s ready, my lady.” Polly’s cheerful voice floated out from the dressing room.

“Thank you.” Louisa got up and headed toward the steam-filled room. Polly helped her out of her damp clothes and then left, promising to be back in time to dress her for dinner.

Louisa lay back in the rose-scented bathwater and closed her eyes. Why had she ever said anything to Nicholas? If she’d just kept quiet, everything would still be the same and she wouldn’t be feeling so vulnerable, her confidence in her abilities shaken yet again.

“Good evening, my dear.”

Louisa opened her eyes and found Nicholas smiling down at her through the perfumed steam. Instinctively she crossed her hands over her breasts and drew her knees together. “Nicholas...”

He sat on the edge of the bath and tucked a strand of her curling wet hair behind her ear. He'd taken his coat, cravat, and waistcoat off and his shirt had fallen open at the throat. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't, I..." His hand lingered on her skin, traced a soapy path from her earlobe down to her throat. She swallowed convulsively. "Was there something you wanted?"

His gaze followed his fingers, slid to her shoulder and to the swell of her breasts below. She tensed as his fingertips disappeared below the water and followed the curve of her generous bosom.

"It occurred to me today that I've never seen you naked."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure." His whole hand vanished beneath the clouded water and he weighed her breast in his palm. "I'm sure I'd remember your breasts."

"My breasts?" Goodness, it was hard for her to even say the word. Her mother would be horrified. She hunched her shoulders forward. "I've probably tried to keep them hidden. My mother always said they were vulgar."

"Vulgar?" She watched in fascination as he leaned closer and kissed the upper part of her breast. "How absurd." He whispered the words against her skin, the faint brush of his unshaven jaw making her tremble. His thumb moved upward and stroked over her already tight nipple, and she jumped. He did it again and then brought her whole breast higher in the water and settled his mouth over her nipple.

"Oh!" Louisa gasped and grabbed frantically at the back of his head, her fingers tangling into his thick brown hair and clinging on. "Oh, my goodness."

She forgot to say anything else as he cupped her other breast in his hand and played with that nipple, too. When he transferred his mouth from one breast to the other, she moaned his name and hung on to him even tighter. Heat gathered low in her belly, and she pressed her thighs together to assuage the unaccustomed ache. She wanted more, she wanted something... but what exactly was it, and how on earth was she supposed to ask for it?

When he finally raised his head, his eyes were narrowed, his breathing as erratic as hers. He kissed her mouth then, his tongue delving deep, demanding a response, which she willingly offered him. The rattle of a coal scuttle made him pause and glance behind him. He kissed the top of her head.

“My valet will be looking for me. I have to go. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Yes.” That was all she could manage before he smiled and walked away from her, leaving her in a state of anticipation—for what? For more of his kisses? She touched her breasts and shuddered at her sensitive nipples. He’d kissed her there and made her feel beautiful. She got out of the bath and wrapped herself in a big drying cloth. Apparently her mother was wrong about something else as well. It seemed some men did like large breasts after all.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Nicholas watched Louisa through the candelabra placed on the table between them. Her skin was flushed, her color high, and there was a dreamy look in her eyes that made him confident that his foray into the dressing room hadn't shocked her too badly after all. His cock swelled at the thought of her nipples in his mouth, how she'd gasped for him, how much he'd wanted to slide his mouth and fingers lower and taste her core. Were her nipples still hard from his mouth, and was she wet for him? He wanted to pull her onto his lap and find out.

"Did you have a good day, my lord?"

Her hesitant question made him blink, and he hastily refocused his attention on her face. "Yes, my dear, I had an excellent day. How about you?"

She made a face. "I saw my mother, of course, and your sister."

"And how were they? Both as charming as ever?"

She sighed. "Well your sister was charming. My mother was... her usual self."

"Perhaps you shouldn't visit her quite so frequently." He said it gently. The last thing he wanted was to find himself at odds with her over her blasted mother. "She depends on you rather too much I fear."

"You're right, but what am I to do?"

“Tell her you’re busy.”

“She’s my mother, my lord.”

He reached across the table and took her hand. “And I’m your husband, and I want you at home more. Tell your mother that. She won’t argue.”

Louisa’s smile was hopeful. “She’d certainly understand if you started issuing commands to me like my father does—and she’d tell me to obey you.”

“Exactly.” He squeezed her fingers and stood up. “Now come to bed.”

Louisa glanced over her shoulder at the lone footman stationed by the door. Her attitude to the servants still surprised him. Having grown up in large, sometimes well-staffed houses, he tended not to give his servants much thought. Louisa still struggled to forget that they were constantly surrounded by people and thus rarely alone.

He tugged at her hand. “Come on. It’s our house, we can go to bed whenever we like, and I think it’s time to begin your seduction, don’t you? We’ve wasted quite enough of our marriage already.”

He led her upstairs, and rather than bidding her his usual punctilious good night at her door, followed her in. She glanced back at him, her brown eyes wide, and a wary question in their depths. Nicholas nodded at Polly, who had risen from her seat by the fire and dropped her piece of mending.

“Good evening, Polly.”

Polly curtsied and awkwardly scooped up the lace-edged petticoat that had fluttered to the floor. “Good evening, my lord. Shall I come back later, my lady?”

Nicholas answered her. "That won't be necessary. You can retire for the night."

He watched her leave and then turned back to his wife who was staring at him, one hand gripping the chair by her dressing table. What did she think he was going to do? Ravish her? Well he was, but not quite yet...

"Don't worry, I'll help you out of your gown." Nicholas smiled encouragingly at his silent wife. "I'm quite competent."

"I'm sure you are."

Her quiet words made him want to kick himself. Alluding to his expertise at coaxing other women out of their clothes was hardly going to endear him to his wife. "I meant that when I was younger I used to help April dress."

"You did?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes my father forgot to pay the bills, and we were left without many servants. We learned to make do for ourselves."

Louisa sat down on the small couch at the bottom of her bed; her expression arrested and fixed on his face. "I never thought of you as being without every comfort a man could dream of."

"Having a title doesn't necessarily mean a family has wealth. My father preferred to piss away his inheritance on gambling, horses, and women." He took the seat beside her. "As long as he could keep up appearances, he didn't care if we were penniless or as near to it as possible. It was a good thing that he died when he did, or else we would've really been in the suds."

"Which is one of the reasons why you agreed to marry me."

Nicholas held her gaze. “That’s true. I’m glad we can speak openly of it. I would hate to think I had deceived you in any way.”

“Oh, I was not deceived.” Louisa stood up and walked across to her dressing table. She pretended to fiddle with the clasp of her bracelet. “Not at all. I knew exactly what you wanted from me.”

She jumped as he appeared in the mirror behind her and took her hand. He leaned in close to finagle the bracelet clasp open. He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the inside of her wrist and then the center of her palm. “Is that one of the reasons why you don’t ask me for anything?”

“I don’t understand.”

He kissed her throat and wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her back against his chest and torso. She found herself looking at herself in the mirror, his dark head close to hers, his blue eyes intent. “You don’t ask me to buy you things; you don’t ask for jewelry, or lap dogs, or a larger dress allowance.”

She frowned at his reflection. “I have everything I need.”

His smile was full of sweetness. “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard a woman say that before. I obviously married a saint.”

“I’m not a saint, I was just brought up differently.”

“And thank God for that.” His teeth grazed her ear and settled over her earlobe, then slowly bit down. She shivered and realized she could feel the hard pulse of his arousal through the thin silk of her gown. “But what can I give you, if you want for nothing?”

“Your company?” she whispered. “Your interest?”

His mouth left her ear, and he kissed his way down her neck to her shoulder. He trailed his index finger along the edge of her bodice. “Oh, you have my interest. In truth, at dinner I wondered whether your nipples were still hard for me.” Louisa gasped as his fingertip delved beneath the silk of her bodice and past the stiff barrier of her corset. “Ah yes, they still are.”

Before she could reply, he turned her away from the mirror and sat her on the couch. He came down beside her, trapping her into the corner between his hands and his body. “I wanted to touch you, to have you sit on my lap and let me fondle you.”

“In the dining room?”

“Yes, in front of the servants. Luckily, I restrained myself and decided to bring you up here instead.”

Louisa struggled with the desire to simply lie back and let him touch her, but unfortunately, her passion for honesty wouldn’t allow it. “Why are you being like this, with me?”

“Don’t you like it?”

“That’s not the point.”

He regarded her seriously for a long moment. “Because a very good friend of mine pointed out to me today that you aren’t just my wife, but a woman.”

“I’ve always been a woman.”

“I know that, but...” he hesitated. “I fear I labeled you as ‘wife.’”



“I have no idea what you are talking about, and I’m not sure if I appreciate you discussing me with someone else.” Even as she spoke she was guiltily aware that she’d spoken to April about Nicholas as well, but at least she’d tried to be discreet.

“I can assure you that my friend will not gossip about us.” He took her hand. “Will you please forgive me, and let me carry on kissing you? We have a lot of lost time to make up.”

Louisa looked doubtfully at him. “I suppose that will be all right, but...” His mouth descended over hers, and she forgot what she had been about to say as he took his time kissing her. She learned how to breathe through her nose to prolong the intimate contact, how to use her tongue against his to drive him wild. He was almost on top of her now, one leg drawn over hers, the hardness of his cock pressed against her hip. Strange things were happening low in her belly, and her breasts ached for his touch.

He drew back and stared down at her. “While I sat there imagining you on my lap during dinner, I also imagined tasting more than your breasts. Will you let me remove your gown?”

Louisa barely managed a nod as he sat up and maneuvered her around so that her back faced him. She closed her eyes and let the dress slide from her shoulders, heard the soft hiss of the silk, the sudden catch of his breath.

“Stand up a moment and step out of the gown.” She obeyed him and waited as he tossed the swathe of blue silk over the nearest chair. A sudden chill swept through her, but it wasn’t just from the cold. “Would you object if I removed my coat and waistcoat?”

This time she shook her head and watched him strip off his outer garments. It reminded her of the earlier moment in their shared dressing room when he’d bent over her in the bath. Her nipples tightened even more and she had an absurd desire to

touch herself there, to soothe that promise of heat and the ache of desire.

He knelt at her feet and guided her back down onto the couch. He was so much taller that even when she was sitting his face was almost level with hers. She studied his thick brown hair and narrowed blue eyes, the hint of desire that both softened and hardened his face, as if a stranger lurked behind the amiable visage she saw every day. A harder, more brutal man, and a man who took what he wanted when he wanted it. He reminded her of someone...

He touched her knee, his hand heavy and hot over the thin muslin of her shift and stockings. "May I remove your corset? It will be in the way."

Louisa wanted to ask him of what, but she turned sideways on the seat to allow him access to the spiral binding of her corset. His fingers moved deftly against her back, and she was soon able to breathe again. She looked warily down at him as he placed his hands on her waist and settled her back against the couch.

"As I was saying, at dinner I was contemplating all the places I had yet to touch or taste you." He leaned against her knees and kissed her breast through the sheer muslin.

Louisa managed to clear her throat. "I believe you have already touched and tasted me there." She couldn't believe how prim she sounded. He must think her a complete fool. He looked up at her, and she saw nothing to indicate he thought her stupid. In truth, he was looking at her as if he might possibly devour her. It was quite exhilarating.

"I'm just reacquainting myself with my newest territory before moving on." He sucked on her nipple until Louisa found her fingernails digging into her palms. "I have to make sure that I am welcome and well remembered."

While he touched her, he also moved against her, exerting gentle pressure on her knees until she had no choice but to open them and allow his upper body to press against her in a most intimate fashion. He continued to suckle at her nipples, his fingers testing and touching everything his mouth was not. Her hand stole into his hair, and she held on as he sucked on her, the rhythm lending itself to the sway of her body, and to the motion of her hips as she rubbed herself against his stomach.

She moaned as one of his hands slid around her hips and he spread his fingers over her bottom, moaned even more when he drew away from her, leaving her wet shift clinging to her hard tight nipples and to the junction of her thighs. He looked down at her and smiled, cupped her between the legs in the palm of his hand. "That's better."

He took her mouth, his tongue plunging inside. The heel of his hand pressed in the same pattern of advance and retreat on her sex. Heat throbbed and flowered beneath the hard edge of his hand, making her forget about anything but the need for him to continue, for him never to stop, for him to keep her on that brink of pleasure that had suddenly become more necessary to her than breathing, or dignity, or civility.

Nicholas made a growling sound in his throat and stripped the muslin away from her sex, needing the contact of her bare skin against his hand. He groaned as his fingers dipped into her swollen wetness, swirled around her tight hot bud, and dipped inside her. She was moving with him, her fingernails digging into his shoulders, into his scalp. He didn't care; he wanted to make her come for him more than anything he had ever wanted before.

God, but he needed to taste all that hot wetness as well. He swallowed at the thought and knew he had to have her before she shattered in his arms. It took all his strength to wrench away from her kisses, to not kiss her breasts, and to settle his head between her thighs. She smelled divine, so wet and wanton that he forgot she was his wife, forgot everything but the urge to lick and suckle and bite her into complete submission.

He drove his tongue deep twice and then withdrew, swirled around her swollen lips, the hard bud of her clit. He licked her and sampled her until he could no longer see or taste anything but her, until even the pain as she tugged at his hair was dimmed by the spectacle of her pushing herself in his face, until he was drowning in her and not caring at all.

“Nicholas.” She sounded as desperate as he felt, her voice high. “Please...”

He managed to slide three fingers inside her, used his mouth and his thumb on her clit and took her over into pleasure, felt the waves of it throb and ebb around his embedded fingers, wanted to shove his cock into her to experience it more deeply. God, his cock... he was going to come in his pantaloons if he didn't get some relief soon. He wanted her mouth, her sex, his shaft between her breasts covering her in his seed...

Nicholas slowly opened his eyes and sat back. Louisa was just staring down at him, her legs still open, her nipples still hard. His cock protested as he slowly eased away from her.

“Are you all right?” she asked breathlessly. Nicholas could only stare back at his disheveled wife and yearn. “Nicholas?”

“I'm fine.”

\* \* \*

Louisa scrambled to sit up and pull down her shift as Nicholas remained crouched in front of her, a peculiarly desperate expression on his face. Was he disgusted by her? Had she somehow behaved inappropriately? She hadn't even realized women were capable of doing “that,” let alone that it would prove so liberating.

His smile was strained, and one of his hands rested over his groin. Louisa couldn't help but stare at the thick bulge of his cock and the wetness that marred the front of his pantaloons. She might have achieved that glorious state of release, but had Nicholas? And if not, how on earth was she supposed to ask him what to do next?

“Are you sure you are all right?”

He grimaced as he managed to get to his feet, still protecting his groin as if he were fielding close to the wicket in a game of cricket. “I'll be fine.”

He sank down next to her and fumbled with the buttons of his pantaloons. “I apologize if this might shock you, but I need to...”

She couldn't help but stare as he shoved down his pantaloons and smallclothes to reveal his swollen cock. Had she ever seen it before, like this, erect and in the candlelight? If so, she had probably shut her eyes, but now she was intrigued. His shaft was thick with a swollen purplish crown that was wet. She leaned toward him as she smelled the salty tang of his seed. That at least was familiar.

Nicholas wrapped his hand around the base of his shaft and sighed. “Don't look if you don't want to, I'm not trying to shock you, I just need...” He started to move his hand, the motion jerky and abrupt, violent almost. She moved closer. He studied her through narrowed eyes. “Either help me or move back; at this point I care not.”

He sounded quite desperate, as desperate as she had felt just before he'd made her world fly apart. She added her fingers to his, flinched at the heat of his flesh, the hardness beneath the softness, the way his skin moved over the whole. He groaned and guided her into a fast rhythm, his hips joining into the thrust and pull of their fingers, his mouth tightening, his eyes closing.

With a hoarse cry, he grabbed her other hand and placed it palm down over the top of

his shaft. Louisa held still as she felt the hot wetness of his seed cover and overflow her fingers. It took several moments before Nicholas collapsed back onto the seat and covered his eyes. He was breathing hard as if he'd been in a race.

Experimentally, she moved her hands, felt his now diminished shaft twitch beneath her questing fingers, and the thickness of his seed drip through her fingers.

“Take this.” He gave her his handkerchief and she carefully wiped her fingers and then patted helpfully at his groin where the black curls were now as wet as her own. As she worked, his shaft jerked against her hand and she paused to observe it.

Nicholas gave a short laugh. “He wants more, I think, so don't tempt him with your clever hands.”

“More? Didn't we just...” Louisa didn't know quite where to look, at his expanding shaft or into his eyes, both seemed equally dangerous.

“I've always been quick to recover.”

Which was probably why he'd been so popular with the ladies of the ton . Louisa handed him back his handkerchief and wrapped her arms around her raised knees. Is that what he'd resorted to doing after visiting her bed? Used his own hands to pleasure himself while she slept on in blissful ignorance of the pleasure she might've been having?

He sighed. “What's wrong, Louisa? Have I shocked you immeasurably?”

She managed to smile. “No, it was all... quite fascinating. I didn't know...” She stopped speaking and simply gazed into his eyes. Who had been hurt most? Her for being so ignorant, or him for depriving them both of such pleasure? She wasn't sure, didn't even want to think about all their wasted opportunities at that point. One thing

she did know was that she was never going back, that she would embrace her newfound knowledge and not be ashamed.

“I’m glad I gave you pleasure,” she whispered.

He surprised her by lifting her into his arms and walking her across to her bed. He pulled back the covers and deposited her in the middle. For one wild second he hesitated, and she hoped he’d get in with her, but he drew back and rebuttoned his pantaloons. “Thank you for allowing me to share your joy.”

Louisa clutched at the covers and suddenly felt awkward. What exactly did you say to a man who had made you lose all sense of propriety and scream his name, even if he was your husband? “I wouldn’t have known it existed without you.”

His smile was warm as he patted her knee. “Better than a book?”

She swallowed hard. She’d forgotten that she was a challenge, that he had something to prove, and that he was determined to seduce her. “Messier.”

He chuckled and kissed her mouth. “Thank goodness. If you can still joke with me—I didn’t shock you too badly. Go to sleep and I’ll see you in the morning. I believe we have a ball to attend at my sister’s tomorrow evening.”

His ability to return to making casual conversation after he’d simply shattered her world was breathtaking—but then the experience hadn’t exactly been new to him, had it? She struggled to keep smiling. “Indeed we do. Good night.”

He blew her a kiss as he walked away, his coat and waistcoat slung over his arm. She managed to keep the smile on her face until he gently shut the door, before she sank down into the pillows and pulled the covers over her head. Her body was still tingling from the attentions of his hands and mouth, her nipples hard. Her hand drifted down

to her sex, and she found she was still wet, still wanting. She imagined a naked Nicholas leaning over her as he slid his thick length deep inside her... Whatever he thought of her, she knew it would happen again, and that it would always be different, because her body finally understood what it had been created for—to accept a man. Perhaps her mother had been right about that after all...

With a sigh, Louisa curled onto her side and stared into the darkness. Nicholas was probably already asleep without a care in the world, one step closer to achieving his aim of proving himself better than any fictional pirate could ever be. Hadn't he known that anyway, and if not, why? Had she been so concerned about not asking him for everything, of not bothering him that she'd neglected to ask if there was any possibility that he might come to love her?



### CHAPTER FIVE

Louisa smiled nervously at Nicholas as she sat opposite him in the carriage on the way to the ball. He was dressed in a black coat, gray waistcoat, and white pantaloons. His cravat sported a black onyx pin that caught the feeble light inside the comfortable carriage. He appeared relaxed, one arm braced on the back of the seat, his feet touching hers.

“You look very nice, my dear.”

She glanced down at the deep rose of her low bodice and instinctively sucked in her stomach. “Do you think so? April assured me that this color was not only fashionable but that it suited me as well.”

He studied her for a long while, almost as if he hadn’t ever really looked at her before. It was quite disconcerting, especially as he had recently lavished his attention on parts of her that no other human being had viewed since she was a small child. “April was right. The color is perfect on you.” He winked. “It’s strange that someone who has such appalling taste in decorating has such immaculate style, don’t you think?”

Louisa couldn’t help but smile back at him. “April has been very kind to me.”

“I should imagine she’s simply glad I’ve finally settled down and stopped creating gossip for the ton.”

“Were you really that bad?”

His smile died. “When I was younger, yes. I blush to remember some of my more foolish exploits, but luckily I grew up and became far more discriminating in my choices.”

Louisa eyed him dubiously. She didn’t quite have the nerve to ask him either about his conquests or about his current arrangements. Her mother insisted he would still keep a mistress for Louisa’s sake and that she should be grateful he refrained from exposing her to the more bestial side of his nature.

The thought of him turning to another woman brought a strange tightness to her chest. Was that what he’d been trying to tell her before? That a wife was not required to behave like a woman who enjoyed sex? Could it be possible that he agreed with her mother? But no, he had touched her far more intimately last night, and she’d welcomed the intimacy, not recoiled from it.

“I think we’re here,” Nicholas announced, and reached for his hat and gloves. “Do you have a shawl, my dear? It is perishing cold out there.”

He helped her out of the carriage, and she started to climb the steps. She grabbed on to his arm as someone pushed past her and ended up with her face against his chest. The scent of bay rum and warm male enveloped her, and she simply breathed him in. She wondered how it might feel to kiss his naked chest, to lick a path from his small flat nipples to his muscled belly and then perhaps even lower.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

She gasped and looked up into his eyes. His gaze intensified and he drew her hastily up the stairs and into the cavernous, crowded hall beyond. Inside, the chatter of voices bouncing off the walls and chandeliers created a roar fit for a county fair.

“Whatever were you thinking about?” His amused question made her blush as he

noded to his sister's butler and maneuvered her through the crowds and toward the back of the house where it was quieter and less stifling. Her back hit a wall and he loomed over her. "Would you like to tell me?"

She stared at his cravat. "You would think me... forward."

He leaned into her, one of his hands planted on the wall by the side of her face. "I would think you honest enough to answer your husband from whom, surely, nothing should be withheld?"

She licked her lips. "I was wondering how your skin would taste if I kissed it."

He went still. "Which particular part of my skin?"

She forced herself to look into his eyes. "Your chest, your belly, your..." Oh, my goodness, she couldn't say it, she just couldn't.

"My?" he prompted. "My knee?"

"Not quite."

He edged even closer until his mouth hovered a tantalizing half inch away from hers. "What then?" he whispered, "My cock? I'd like you to kiss that, take it into your pretty little mouth, and suck me dry."

His tongue traced a leisurely path along the seam of her lips and then plunged into her mouth. Louisa couldn't have moved if her life had depended on it. Could a woman do that? Would a woman want to do that? After all, he had done a similar thing to her, licked and sucked her into complete shivering abandon.

He stopped kissing her but didn't move away. In the confines of the dark corridor,

with his body covering hers, she felt quite brave. “Would a man like that?”

A visible shudder ran through him. “This man would. Perhaps you might think on it.”

“Perhaps I will.”

He straightened and took her hand, placed it firmly over the tented front of his pantaloons. “Now we will have to wait until I’m decent to be seen again.”

She sighed. “I don’t suppose we could just go home, not when it is your sister’s ball. She would never forgive us if we didn’t turn up.”

Unconsciously, she petted his shaft until his fingers closed around her wrist. “Madam, if you keep that up, I’ll be coming into your hand and disgracing myself.”

She looked around the deserted hallway and realized that they were near Lord Fotherskill’s secretary’s office. “But what if I wanted to try what you suggested?”

“Do you think I’m going to stop you?” He grabbed her by the shoulders and hurried her into the secretary’s office, locking the door behind them.

She sank to her knees and looked up at him. “Not if it brings you as much pleasure as you brought me.”

“You’re sure?” he asked, even as he fumbled with the buttons of his placket. For once he sounded even less certain than she did. Somehow that helped her become bolder. “Otherwise I can...”

She took over the task and revealed his thick thrusting shaft. From this angle it looked rather fearsome and far too large to fit into her mouth.

“It’s all right. Just take as much as you want, I don’t expect...” he broke off with a groan at her first tentative lick over the crown. He was already wet and she tasted him carefully: the merest hint of salt, almost like thick tears. She rested one hand on his thigh, wrapped the other around the base of his shaft, and opened her mouth.

“Ah...” He exhaled as she sucked him slowly into her mouth until the whole of the crown disappeared. She discovered that if she moved both her mouth and her hand back and forth over his flesh he seemed to adore it. He cradled the back of her head in his hand, urging her onward with every slow sucking motion.

She also found that even as she sucked him she could use the very tip of her tongue to lick at the top of his cock, feel the wet slit, the rough texture of the under skin, and the smoothness of the whole. He groaned her name and started to angle his hips toward her mouth as if trying to push himself deeper. She gripped him tightly and restricted his motion, which seemed to excite him further.

“God, Louisa... I...”

He made one last convulsive movement, and her mouth was suddenly full of his seed. She had to swallow fast to avoid choking. She waited until he released his grip on the back of her head and sat back. Nicholas looked like a man who had just experienced bliss, and she was suddenly proud of herself. It seemed that lovemaking was not all about a man’s needs and desires after all.

She waited while Nicholas tucked his cock back into his pantaloons and rebuttoned the placket. He held out his hands and brought her to her feet in one easy motion.

“That was very kind of you, my lady.”

“Kind? Did I not do it correctly?”

He patted his groin. “Well everything is still attached, so I assume you did.”

“Would it hurt if I bit you there?”

He winced. “I should think so, although I’ve heard that in certain situations it can be quite alluring.”

She frowned and he grinned at her, his expressive face alive with warmth and appreciation. Just seeing him like this made her want to offer to kiss him again. It felt as if she was being admitted into his affections, as if he was finally opening up to her.

He kissed her forehead. “We should go. April will be wondering where we are.”

“Of course.” Louisa patted her hair and opened the door. There was no one in the dark hallway, so they walked back to the main hall and ascended the stairs to the ballroom. April stood at the entrance to the ballroom, flanked by her portly smiling husband. Her expression lightened when she saw Nicholas and Louisa approaching and she rushed toward them.

“Oh, where have you been? I’d quite given you up! My dear Gilbert was wishing me at the devil having to stand here for so long.” Since her admonishment was delivered with a smile and a hug, Louisa didn’t take her too seriously. “You look lovely, Louisa, I told you that color would suit you, didn’t I?”

“Indeed you did. I...”

April poked Nicholas in the chest with her fan. “Doesn’t she look well? Have you even noticed she has a new gown on yet? You probably haven’t.” She rolled her eyes in Louisa’s direction. “Men are positively dreadful at offering a compliment, even when one has spent hours at one’s toilette.”

Nicholas took Louisa's hand and kissed it. "I have not only noticed the gown, but I've complimented Louisa on it already, so you can stop your twittering, sis."

April gave an exaggerated sigh, linked her arm through Louisa's, and led her toward the ballroom. "We'll ignore him, my dear, and perhaps he'll go away and make himself useful in the card room or something."

Louisa turned her head to look back at Nicholas, but his attention had been claimed by a fragile-looking beauty who clutched his arm and gazed up at him adoringly. Not that Nicholas seemed to mind, his smile was as wide and welcoming as the one he had just given her.

April pinched her elbow. "Louisa, it is not proper to look back at your husband in that slavish manner. People will think you are hanging on his sleeve! Come and circulate with me. I'm sure Nicholas will find you later."

Louisa sighed and obediently followed her sister-in-law into the crowded ballroom. They were immediately engulfed by well-wishers who wanted to compliment April on the ball. Louisa could no longer see Nicholas at all. Had he even entered the ballroom? April was forever lecturing her about how best to ignore her husband in society settings. It seemed that was the fashionable thing to do. What amused Louisa was how much her mother would've approved of April's instructions. Mama was always telling Louisa not to expect too much of her husband's valuable time and attention.

Louisa sat next to April in the ballroom and suffered through the next half hour listening to April collect all the latest gossip and criticize everyone else's gowns. It all seemed so silly to her, and not what she'd expected of society at all—or of marriage. She'd imagined days with Nicholas at her side and evenings filled with quiet conversation, and the promise of the intimacies of the marriage bed.

“Oh, look!” April whispered. “There’s that horrid Lady Basingstone. She’s always had her eye on Nicholas. I wonder why he’s dancing with her?” She nudged Louisa. “Now that Nicholas is married himself, she probably thinks he’s fair game.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Once a woman has given her husband an heir or two, most men turn a blind eye to her having a little affair of her own.” April’s smile was tinged with sadness. “And truthfully, my dear, don’t you think that a wife deserves a little fun after the inconveniences and humiliations of one’s husband having a mistress?”

“I don’t know, April. It’s not something Nicholas and I have discussed.”

“Of course you haven’t, my dear. You and Nicholas are newlyweds. I’m sure the thought hasn’t entered your mind.” April’s laughter sounded forced, and the glance she threw toward Nicholas was distinctly worried. “But you must know, my love, that if he did ever stray, Nicholas would always treat you with the greatest of respect.”

“Why do you say that?”

April squeezed her hand tightly. “I heard a silly rumor this evening that Nicholas had been seen in... well, in a place that he should not have been near. I’m sure it meant nothing. It was probably just a mistake, although the person who told me did know Nicholas quite well, but... anyway, I thought you should be on your guard. And, don’t think I won’t be speaking to him about this, because I will!”

Louisa set her teeth as her husband swept past them with yet another woman in his arms. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, and yet, less than an hour ago she’d allowed him to persuade her to... she stood up abruptly. “I’m going to fetch myself a glass of ratafia. Would you like something, April?”



“Oh, no, dear. I’ll be fine. You run along.”

Louisa stayed in the quiet supper room until she felt marginally more in control of her emotions. Perhaps this was why most society marriages never developed into anything more than mild liking and mutual respect. Did Nicholas have a mistress, and how on earth could she find out without publicly embarrassing herself?

Jealousy was a horrible thing, and she suspected she was in the throes of it. Her fingers curled around her glass. Every time one of those glamorous women looked at Nicholas, she had a strange desire to launch herself at them and pull their hair out. She bit her lip. What a lowering thought. Perhaps she really did lack class.

“I wondered where you’d gone.”

She looked up into Nicholas’s amused blue eyes and manufactured a smile. “Were you looking for me?”

“Of course I was. I was hoping you’d dance with me.”

Louisa put down her glass with a thump. “You don’t have to, you know.”

He glanced down at her. “And what exactly does that mean?”

She allowed him to take her hand but didn’t move. “Just that April says we have no obligation to be seen together at all. In fact, spending time with one’s spouse at a ball is considered quite gothic.”

“Well, I’ve never agreed with April about anything, and that just sounds absurd.”

“But she’s right, isn’t she? It isn’t fashionable for us to be seen together.” She swallowed hard, tasted him on her tongue. “I fear my ridiculous attempt to gain your

attention is fruitless and bound for disappointment.”

His smile disappeared. “Is that so?” He placed her hand on his sleeve. “Come and dance with me.”

She was so surprised that she followed him back into the ballroom where a waltz was just beginning. She shivered as he slid his arm around her waist and held her far closer than was considered appropriate. To complete her confusion, he bent his head so that his mouth brushed her ear.

“Have you forgotten that you set me a challenge?”

“I didn’t set you a challenge, you just decided to, oh.” She gasped as his teeth grazed her skin.

“Have you also forgotten that not an hour ago you had your lips around my cock?”

Heat burned on Louisa’s cheeks, but she continued dancing; Nicholas was holding her so tightly she could hardly breathe, let alone fall.

“I liked that, Louisa, I liked coming into your mouth, the way you swallowed my seed and took all of me without protest.” He twirled her around a corner so fast that the other dancers and spectators seemed like a blur. “And as soon as I get you alone I intend to slide my tongue inside you and have you scream and dig your nails into my skin. Will you like that?”

She looked into his eyes. “I’m not sure.”

“You will, because I’m going to do it until you’ve come so many times that you’re begging for my cock, begging to be fucked as hard and as often as I want. That’s what makes this evening exciting to me, the fact that even if I don’t stand next to you

all night, I know I'll have you all to myself soon, and that I can do what the devil I want with you."

"Oh." Louisa concentrated on her steps as her body heated and yearned toward Nicholas.

"Because you're wet for me now, aren't you? You're thinking about what I'm going to do to you, how you're going to feel, how you'll arch your back and rub yourself against me."

"Yes." As Nicholas whispered his erotic litany into her ear, Louisa could barely function. Despite everything, she wanted to rip his clothes off, wanted to bite him, pull his hair, and ravage his mouth until he cried out, too. "I want that."

The music paused and he drew her off the dance floor. "Do you understand now why I'm quite happy to watch you go off and sit with your friends and dance with other men?"

"I believe so, but..."

"But, what?"

She managed an unsteady breath. "But you must know that I would never... share myself with another person."

"Are you suggesting I might?"

She met his gaze, her heart beating uncomfortably loud in her chest. "I don't know."

He released her hand. He looked as if she had slapped him. "I suppose I should thank you for your honesty, but at the moment I feel more like putting you over my knee.

Go and sit with April. I'll come and find you when I'm ready to go home."

He bowed stiffly and walked away from her, leaving her prey to the watchful eyes of the other dancers, who, sensing trouble, closed in on her, false sympathy filling their faces. With all the dignity she could muster, Louisa made her way back to April's side and sat down. Her pleasure in the evening ruined by her lack of sophistication and stupid desire for honesty. No man liked to be confronted by unpleasant truths in the middle of a ballroom. Even she knew that.

\* \* \*

Nicholas headed for the card room, his expression so forbidding that several of the other guests moved quickly out of his path. What the devil was the matter with his wife? It seemed that every time he advanced the smallest step in her affections, she immediately took three steps back. What kind of man did she think he was?

He stopped walking. The kind of man she was used to seeing in a society marriage, the kind his father had been. Damnation, she was right to be skeptical. Even he wouldn't have believed himself capable of fidelity before he'd met and married her.

"Nick?" He looked up into the amused blue gaze of Captain David Gray. "Is everything all right?"

He attempted a shrug. "I'll never understand women."

"Then why try?" David offered him a glass of brandy. "Women do tend to complicate the simplest of matters with all that unnecessary emotion, don't they?"

"Sarcasm doesn't become you." Nicholas cast David a blistering look as they settled into two upright chairs against the wall and pretended to watch the card players. "Perhaps I should be more specific. I'll never understand my wife, and unfortunately,

due to the potentially long-standing nature of our relationship, I have to bloody try.”

“That’s true.” David contemplated the scene in front of them. “She is quite young and inexperienced, Nick.”

“I know that.”

“And, perhaps if I might be so bold as to mention it, your sister isn’t.”

“What do my problems with Louisa have to do with my sister?”

David looked at him. “Because it’s obvious that April is your wife’s closest friend in Town. Perhaps the advice your wife is receiving is a little too sophisticated and worldly for her.”

Nicholas let out his breath. “I haven’t considered that. I was just pleased that they deal so well together.”

“I’m sure that was important to you. You’re very fond of April, aren’t you?”

“We survived my father together. We protected each other.” Nicholas sighed and took a long drink of his brandy. “April is eight years older than me. That makes her fourteen years older than Louisa.”

“Between April and a socially unacceptable mother, your wife’s perception of her place in society and your affections might be a little confused.”

Nicholas smiled. “She won’t be confused after tomorrow night. I’ll make damned sure that she understands exactly what I’d like from her.”

“And how do you intend to do that?”

Nicholas clinked his glass against David's. "I'm taking her to Madame Helene's for a spot of adventuring."

### CHAPTER SIX

“We are going out, again?”

Louisa looked up at Nicholas who had appeared in her bedchamber just after her solitary dinner. She hadn’t seen him all day, had imagined him languishing in the arms of his mistress while complaining bitterly about his terribly unsophisticated wife.

“Indeed we are.” Nicholas inclined his head an inch and pointed to the box he had deposited on the bed. “And I’d like you to wear these clothes. Ask Polly to help you put them on. I’ll see you downstairs in half an hour.”

Louisa bit her lip. He didn’t exactly sound delighted to be asking for her company, but at least he wasn’t ignoring her. She sighed and walked over to the bed, lifted the lid of the dress box. “Whatever does he want me to wear? It looks like something from my mother’s wardrobe.”

She took out the old-fashioned gold satin overgown and held it up against her. Beneath the dress lay a brown lace underskirt, a single petticoat, a thin shift, a plain set of stays, and a matching brown bodice.

“Ooh, my lady. Whatever is this? Are you going to a masquerade ball?” Polly breathed close to Louisa’s ear. “It looks like the dress in that portrait in the hall the earl’s grandmother is wearing.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Louisa allowed Polly to help her out of her thin high-waisted

muslin dress and remove all her clothing but her stockings and garters. She shivered and drew closer to the heat of the fire. “I’m sure there should be more petticoats and some kind of frame or bustle to hold the skirt out.”

Polly dropped the new shift over Louisa’s head. It was made of such fine lawn that it barely made a difference to her comfort or her modesty. “That’s true, my lady. Do you want me to go and find some more petticoats? Maybe the modiste forgot to put them in.”

Conscious that Nicholas had told her to wear only what was in the box, Louisa shook her head. “No, thank you, Polly. I’m sure I’ll be fine. I wouldn’t want all those layers anyway. I don’t know how our ancestors managed with all those heavy petticoats on.”

“Neither do I, my lady.” Polly laced Louisa into the long stays, tied the petticoat, and then pinned the bodice to it. Lastly Louisa stepped into the underskirt and pinned that to the bodice. “At least the gown has long sleeves and some lovely gold lace on it. That should keep you warm enough.”

Louisa shrugged into the overdress and waited while Polly settled it around her shoulders and drew it closed at her waist with two small hooks. She looked in the mirror and saw how well the brown underskirt contrasted with the gold and how the stays pushed her bosom up to overflow the bodice of the gown. She flattened her hands over her chest, but there was no place for her breasts to go other than outward.

“Do you think it is... quite decent?”

Polly giggled. “I’m sure his lordship will think so. Now let me fix your hair and find you a nice warm cloak and you’ll look perfect, my lady.”

\* \* \*



A quarter of an hour later, Louisa scooped up the gold mask that Polly had discovered in the bottom of the dress box, gathered her cloak around her, and descended into the hall. Nicholas stood waiting for her; his long, flowing cloak concealed his clothing. He wore riding boots rather than his usual shoes.

He held out his hand. "Are you ready, my lady?"

"Yes, my lord."

His smile was quite wicked as he escorted her through the door and into the carriage. "I'm glad to hear it. I hope this evening lives up to your expectations."

"My expectations?" She studied him as he took the seat opposite her. "I wasn't aware that I had any."

"Of me, or of marriage?"

"That is hardly fair, sir." She looked away and gathered her skirts more closely around her.

"True when the only confidantes you have on the subject are your mother and my sister." He crossed his booted feet at the ankle. "And I should imagine their views on the subject of marriage don't always agree."

"That is true, my lord." She tried to smile. "I have received a great deal of advice from them both, and all of it conflicting."

"Did it ever occur to you to ask me?"

She finally looked at him. "Why would I do that?"

His smile was full of warmth. “Because, surely I am the person most involved with your future happiness and well-being.”

She licked her lips, aware that with Nicholas in such a confiding mood she had nothing to lose and perhaps much to gain. “I did ask you.”

He leaned back and studied her, his eyes narrow. “I suppose you did, in your own unique way, and I hope you will be pleased with my efforts to accommodate you.”

Louisa was about to ask for clarification when the carriage stopped moving and the door was opened to let the steps down.

“Put your mask on, Louisa,” Nicholas commanded.

By the time she was helped out of the carriage and up the wide steps of a large mansion, she was too intrigued to ask anything at all. Nicholas led her into a large, marbled hall where a footman stood stationed at the bottom of the stairs.

“Good evening, my lord, ma’am, and welcome. May I take your cloaks?”

“Good evening. You may take the lady’s cloak.”

Louisa shivered when Nicholas untied the ribbons of her cloak and handed it to the footman. Nicholas remained staring down at her, his gaze fixed on the swell of her bosom. She resisted the temptation to cover herself. He’d chosen the gown for her; he must have known the effect such tight lacing and the old-fashioned stays would have.

“You look very nice. Very... ravishable.”

“Thank you.” He took her hand and kissed the palm. “Where exactly are we?”

He led her toward the curving staircase. “We’re at the pleasure house, I thought you might enjoy it.”

Her fingers clenched on his sleeve. “A bawdy house?”

“No, a house of sexual pleasure for the rich.”

Louisa dug in her heels and stopped moving. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Not at all. There are no prostitutes here, only willing members of the upper classes who like a bit of variety in their sexual pleasures.”

“Oh.” At the gentle pressure of his fingers on her elbow, Louisa resumed walking, her mind in a whirl. Nicholas’s calm explanation about such a forbidden subject unnerved her. It was all very well to pretend that such sexual excess existed in her mind, but to actually find out they were available in real life? That was both deliciously decadent and surprisingly tempting.

At the top of the stairway a large portrait of a beautiful blond woman dominated the landing.

“Who is that?”

“That’s Madame Helene, the remarkable woman who founded the pleasure house.”

“She is very beautiful.” Louisa wondered if she sounded as wistful as she felt.

“She is not only beautiful, but intelligent as well.”

“You’ve been here before, then?”

“In my past, yes.”

“And why did you bring me here?”

He drew her close and tipped up her chin with his fingertip. “To allow your fantasies to come to life, why else?”

He kissed her hard, his tongue moving possessively into her mouth, his arm wrapped around her waist holding her close. When he drew back, she couldn’t help but look around to see if anyone had noticed their passionate embrace.

He nuzzled her ear. “My dear, this is a place to indulge your fantasies. No one will mind if I kiss you as much as I want to, or if you kiss me back.”

There was a challenge in his voice that fired her blood. “Then perhaps you might show me around.”

He looked down at her for a long moment. “If, at any time, you wish to leave, just tell me and we’ll go.”

“Having gone to all the trouble of bringing me here, you suddenly assume I won’t like it?”

“Not that you won’t like it, more that you will be shocked.”

She gathered her courage. “Mayhap it is time for me to be shocked.”

He kissed her fingers. “Then come with me, and don’t remove your mask.”

\* \* \*

Nicholas led Louisa into the main salon on the first floor. He had no intention of taking her to the two floors above, where the more unusual and perverse sexual activities took place. He was certain the erotic antics being played out in the salon and the various viewing rooms attached to it would be enough to entertain Louisa—at least for tonight.

To the left of the double doors, two women and a man were sprawled naked on a couch. The man was busy suckling at one of the women's breasts while he enthusiastically fucked the other woman. Nicholas felt Louisa stiffen and experienced a corresponding response in his cock. He bent his head and kissed Louisa's throat, admired the way her breasts plumped up over the tight bodice.

"What is it, my dear?"

She turned to whisper in his ear. "That man is with two women."

Nicholas stopped to admire the tableau. "So he is."

Louisa shivered. "Everyone can see them."

"Yes." He took her hand and moved her farther into the room, where a set of chairs were laid out in a circle. In the center of the circle, two men were carefully undressing a woman. Her eyes were closed, but a small smile played over her mouth as the men attended to her. "Would you like to watch?"

Louisa didn't reply, but he maneuvered her into a chair anyway and placed his arm around her shoulders. He waited until one of the men began to unlace the woman's corset before dropping his fingers down to toy with the edge of Louisa's bodice. When the man kissed the woman's breasts, he slid his fingers lower and found Louisa's nipple. He squeezed and teased it into a tight bud while she moved restlessly against him.

When the second man latched on to the woman's other breast Louisa sighed, and Nicholas covered her mouth with his and continued to fondle her nipple. He was hard now and quite willing to pull up her skirts and have her. But he had much more to show her, so much more for her to enjoy with him. And that was what it was all about, wasn't it? Not a quick poke, but a lifetime of erotic experiences to share with one woman—this woman.

He helped Louisa to her feet and took her over toward the buffet table, which was situated at the other end of the long room. He offered her a drink, and she shook her head, her gaze now avidly flitting around the room, her cheeks flushed, her teeth constantly biting into her lower lip. He wanted his teeth there, his mouth possessing hers, his cock between those rosy lips.

He tried to sound nonchalant. "Well, what do you think?"

She looked up at him, her brown eyes wide. "It is like something out of a dream."

"You have dreams like this?"

She blushed. "Sometimes. Doesn't everyone?"

"Indeed. You've dreamed of me, I hope."

"Of course, my lord."

"And what exactly do I do to you in these dreams?"

She met his gaze. "Everything."

His cock jerked at the shy invitation in her eyes. "Trust me. I intend to offer you more than you have ever dreamed of."

\* \* \*

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:51 am*

Louisa caught her breath as Nicholas kissed her again. She wasn't brave enough to tear at his clothing as many of the other patrons of the pleasure house were doing to their men. She yearned to feel his skin against hers, to see if she could reach the sexual heights he had shown her such an intriguing glimpse of.

"Come on."

She allowed Nicholas to take her hand and lead her out of the large red and gold salon and into a quieter hallway lined with white painted doors.

"Where are we now?" she whispered as he continued to walk down the long line of closed doors. Each door had a small plaque. She tried to read some of them, but found that only added to her confusion. What on earth did ANCIENT ROME or A MEDIEVAL FANTASY mean? It was almost as if they were titles of books or paintings.

Nicholas stopped and held her close. "Do you trust me?"

She studied his expression. "Yes, of course."

His smile was tender. "Good. Then close your eyes, count to five hundred, and then open the door and come in." He kissed her hard on the mouth. "Don't worry, I'll find you."

"But..." He kissed her again and then walked away, leaving her facing one of the doors. The handwritten sign on the door simply read LOUISA . With a sigh, she closed her eyes and began to count. She'd said she trusted him and had agreed to



come to this oddly exciting place, so what else could she do but obey his surprising request? Her body was already quivering with a strange mixture of anticipation and arousal.

When she finished counting, she took a deep breath and opened the door. Darkness met her gaze, and she stepped forward onto a wooden-planked floor until she could see the faint outline of a lantern. Around her were several large, stacked barrels, a torn sail, and what looked like a mast and rigging. For some strange reason she could smell the sea, and a small breeze lifted her skirts.

She had almost reached the pool of light surrounding the lantern, when a body crashed into hers and she instinctively yelped. A large hand covered her mouth, and she was pinned to a man's chest.

"I've got her, sir!" Instinctively, Louisa kicked out at the man's shins and he laughed. "She's a feisty one, Captain. Be careful she don't rip your balls off with her teeth!"

Hearty laughter met the man's ribald remarks, and Louisa fought even harder. Whatever was going on, she had obviously blundered into the wrong room. Where was Nicholas and who on earth was manhandling her? Whoever he was, he smelled like a wet kipper. Two other men appeared with lanterns in their hands, and she gaped at them. They were dressed as sailors, one with an eyepatch, the other with a thick beard and a cutlass clasped in his hand.

She kicked out even harder. "Let me go!"

"Not until the captain gets here, my lady. He doesn't like stowaways, even pretty ones like you."

Louisa's thoughts swirled, slowed, and settled on a most peculiar notion. This scene was almost identical to the one at the beginning of her favorite gothic novel. The very one that had gone missing from her room. She took a deep breath and hoped she was

right.

“Unhand me, sirs. You don’t know who you are dealing with. I’m Lady Clarissa Devine, daughter of the Duke of Clifftopville. He will have your heads for this!”

Crude laughter and jeers greeted her retort, and for a moment she wondered if she’d gotten it completely wrong. Then another figure joined the three men, and her throat dried up completely. It was definitely the pirate captain, his billowing white sleeves edged with lace, the neck of his shirt open to display a hint of dark hair and his muscled chest. A long blue sash was tied around his waist, tight black breeches, and top boots completed his attire. Louisa hardly dared look at his face as he swaggered toward her.

“What have we here, Dawkins?”

“A lady, Captain, well she says she’s a lady, but no real lady would be hiding aboard a pirate ship.”

“I was not hiding, sir. I fully intended to confront this, this brigand.”

A rakish smile displaying excellent teeth greeted Louisa’s challenge, and the pirate captain moved even closer. He forced her chin up and stared down at her, his blue eyes stern.

“Aye she is a beautiful wench, and indeed a true lady. I’d recognize Lady Clarissa anywhere.” He nodded at the crewmen. “You may leave us now. I’ll take care of her.” His eyes narrowed. “I’ll teach her a lesson or two about creeping aboard my property.”

“’Tis hardly your property, sir, when you stole this ship from my father!” Louisa retorted.

“I stole nothing. Your father is the thief. He stole not only my ships but my birthright from me.”

“You lie!” Louisa opened her eyes wide and threw herself away from him as the other sailors disappeared, leaving her alone in the semi-darkness with the pirate captain.

His hand snaked out and grabbed her shoulder, bringing her hard against his chest. “It matters not. You are mine now, and I would claim my prize.”

Louisa closed her eyes as he kissed her possessively. His hand roved over her buttocks, bringing her up against the thick bulge in his tight buckskin breeches. She gasped as he threw her over his shoulder and marched purposefully toward the narrow cot in the corner. She landed on her back and he was on her immediately, his hands busy with her laces, stripping her out of her over gown and her bodice to reveal her old-fashioned stays and shift.

He reared over her, his gaze hungry, and produced a knife. Louisa couldn't help but moan as he cut through the tight lacing of her stays and tossed them to the floor. His mouth descended over her breast, and he caught her nipple and sucked hard. She writhed against him as his fingers tangled in her hair and then lower to tease and taunt her other breast. He shoved one leather-clad knee between her legs, opening her even wider to him.

The silk of her stockings felt too thin against the heat and hardness of his thigh. He moved up, and his knee met her mound and pressed against her most tender flesh. She could do nothing but hold on to any part of him he allowed. Soon her hips moved in rhythm to his urgent suckling, heat built between her legs, and she moaned his name. “Please.”

He brought his head up and stared down at her. “What do you want, my little minx?”

In the book, this part of the scene had never been very explicit, so Louisa had to find her own words. “You, I want you.”

He arched an eyebrow and whispered, “Aren’t you supposed to make one last desperate bid for escape?”

“Oh, yes!” She shoved at his chest and managed to roll off the bed. “I’d rather drown than become your plaything, sir!”

“You’ll not escape me.” He caught her easily and brought her face down over his lap, pulled up her shift to expose her bare bottom.

Louisa stared down at the floorboards and realized she couldn’t move. “You aren’t really going to...” She gasped as his hand connected with her buttock, and then did it again. She began to grow unpleasantly warm as he alternated his smacks between her cheeks.

Suddenly, his hand slipped lower and slid between the heated wet folds of her sex, teasing and enticing, penetrating and then withdrawing. His palm settled over her most sensitive bud, and he buried two fingers inside her. She shrieked as his other hand descended on her heated buttocks, felt the twin pressure of the pain and the pleasure his hands could bring to her, felt it until they blended together into a blaze of desire that consumed her.

With a harsh sound of need, he brought her upright and down onto his thick waiting cock. Her scream was buried in his mouth as his hands took control of her hips. He soon had her moving up and down his shaft, bringing her closer and closer to a fiery explosion that threatened to shatter them both.

She climaxed and heard him groan, his fingers like iron bands on her hips keeping her down onto his still hard flesh. With a roar he stood up and, still holding her, returned to the narrow cot where he laid her down and continued to pound into her. His strokes

shorter, yet more powerful, his mouth fused with hers as he came deep inside her.

She came again wrapping her arms and legs around him, biting his shoulder simply because she could, and because she wanted him to experience the wildness of the feelings he aroused in her.

\* \* \*

Nicholas levered himself away from Louisa and stared down at her ruined shift. With a smile, he drew his dagger and slit it from top to bottom. Her breasts were flushed, her nipples hard and tight. Between her legs his cock still nestled, trapped in her luscious folds. Even as he enjoyed their joined flesh, his cock demanded more and began to fill out. He withdrew and crawled up the bed until he straddled her breasts. He wrapped his fist around the base of his shaft and touched the tip to her mouth.

“Make me hard again, wench. You know how to do it.” She didn’t argue and he liked that, liked that she had fallen so happily into the character of the heroine and allowed him to flaunt himself as the pirate captain. The lurid dialogue from the book might be ridiculous, but it had created a curious sensation in his loins and on his lady. Perhaps he should consider it a fine work of literature after all.

He leaned forward and eased the thick crown of his cock between Louisa’s lips. He was already half-erect and it wouldn’t take much to have him wanting her again. And he intended to fuck her to the best of his ability. She should never forget this night, or the many nights that were to come. Never forget that he was all the man she needed—with a little help from her obviously fully fleshed-out fantasies.

“My lady...” He moved his hips into the rhythm of her sucking, let the pleasure build slowly before he withdrew his cock from her mouth. “Turn around and place your hands on the wall.” She got onto her knees and turned away from him. He paused, one hand stroking his shaft, to admire the sleek curve of her arse, her back, and the wetness already sliding down between her thighs. His seed, his woman. His to do

anything he wanted to with—if she was agreeable.

Nicholas knelt behind her and rubbed his aching cock against the crease of her buttocks. He reached around to cup her breasts, stroked his thumbs over her nipples.

“You are beautiful, my captive. I’m going to enjoy taking you like this, from behind, where I can play with your breasts and your pretty little sex, where you can only open yourself to me and beg me never to stop, to stay inside you forever.”

“Yes.”

He’d long forgotten the script he’d so carefully learned. Louisa needed to know that sex was not all pretty words, that it could be graphic and crude and messy. He needed to know that she could accept him as he was, his wet, hard cock demanding entrance as often as he could persuade her to accept him.

On that thought, he slid inside her, enjoyed the way her muscles clamped down on his shaft, the heated wet glide of her flesh against his hardness, the kick of her heartbeat. She could be enough for him: he sensed it, perhaps had known it from the very first. If only he’d allowed himself to see it.

\* \* \*

Louisa came again, and again he kept moving. She was moaning his name constantly now, the pleasure so intense and her body so sensitive that she’d forgotten how many times she’d taken him inside her. He’d demanded everything she’d had to give, taken her to heights of pleasure that she’d never dreamed of, shown her quite comprehensively that even dressed as a pirate he put all fictional pirate heroes in the shade.

With a deep satisfied groan, Nicholas collapsed over her, his breathing as erratic as her own, his heartbeat slowing and finally returning to normal.

“Nicholas?”

“Hmm...?”

“Whenever I dreamed about the pirate captain, he always had your face. I always hoped...”

He rolled off her and lay beside her, his blue gaze fixed on hers. “Hoped what?”

“That you’d be my hero. In bed or out of it.”

His mouth curved in his generous smile. “I’m glad to have been of service, my lady.” He brushed the corner of her mouth with his fingertip. “And I’m also glad that you told me about that blasted book.”

She wanted to blush but had neither the energy nor the necessary shame left to try. “There is another book that I love almost as well as this one.”

He came up on one elbow and looked down at her. “There’s another one?”

She smiled into his eyes, finally confident that if he was willing to go this far to please her, he would be willing to continue entertaining her deepest fantasies. “Well, there is this knight who returns from the Crusade. . .”

He placed his finger over her lips. “Perhaps you could tell Madame Helene about it. I’m sure she’d love to help you.”

Louisa sat up, wincing as her body protested. “You asked Madame Helene to help you organize all this?”

Nicholas shrugged. “That is her business, to provide opportunities for her guests to enjoy their most erotic fantasies.”

“Did you come here earlier this week, then?”

“I did.”

Louisa smiled at him. “That explains why April was so concerned about me the other day. She must have heard the rumors that you were out on the prowl again.”

His brows drew together as he glared down at her. “And you assumed I would do that?”

“I was told that every man eventually takes a mistress, and that I should be grateful you intended to spare me the worst of your bestial nature.”

“April never said that load of ridiculous drivel, did she?”

“No, that was my mother. April just assured me that it was not my fault, and that when I had provided you with an heir or two, I should take a lover of my own.”

Louisa gasped as Nicholas brought her back down onto the bed and loomed over her. “You will not take a lover.”

“If you will not take a mistress.”

“I have no intention of taking a mistress. I saw what havoc and humiliation that caused my mother and sister. I have no desire to do that to my own wife!”

His biting words no longer scared her. She wrapped a hand around his neck and kissed his nose. “I’m glad to hear it.”

He kissed her and his voice sounded gruff. “Then you believe me?”

A warm sensation coalesced in the region of her heart. “Why would I not? You’ve



stooped to reading and acting out a gothic novel in a sexual pleasure house just to show me how happy you intend to keep me in bed. What else could a man do to show that he cares?"

"What indeed?" He moved away from her and handed her the remnants of her shift. "You might want to cover yourself before you move away from the bed."

She studied the ruined garment. "Why is that?"

He grinned as he stood up stark-naked and bowed toward the other end of the room. "Did I forget to mention that these rooms are sometimes opened to the other guests? I wonder if they enjoyed it as much as we did?"

Louisa stared at him open mouthed. Was he telling her the truth? She grabbed the sheet from the bed and hastily wrapped it around her. Nicholas offered her his hand to help her crawl off the bed, and Louisa buried her face in Nicholas's chest.

Nicholas started to chuckle. "It's all right, my love. There's no one there. I'd hardly do that to you on our first night here. Mayhap another time?"

She thumped him hard on the chest, and he laughed even more and hugged her tightly. She wasn't quite sure what she was going to do to get back at him yet, but she was certain that with Madame Helene's help, she'd find a way. Nicholas led her through another door where a maid helped her dress in a different set of clothing that Nicholas had brought for her.

She met him in the hallway, her mask firmly in place, her smile bright. He looked down at her, his head on one side. "You have forgiven me, then?"

"For tonight." She tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "The pleasure you brought me far outweighed the embarrassment."

“I’m glad to hear that.” He hesitated. “I would never do that to you; publicly humiliate you with another woman.”

She smiled into his eyes. “I know. And I doubt I will ever want another man in the way I want you.” She stood on tiptoe to kiss his mouth. “I love you, Nicholas. I know that is a terribly unfashionable thing to say to one’s husband, but I do love you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you arguing with April at her birthday party.”

He touched her cheek. “Even though she is infuriating, I love her, too.” His smile was beautiful. “And, although I cannot claim to have fallen in love with you over the teacups at April’s, I do love you.”

“Then we are lucky, aren’t we?”

“Lucky?”

“To be married and thus free to be as unfashionably devoted to each other as we wish.”

“We can start a new fashion,” Nicholas said. “We’ll become as popular as my sister for our devotion to each other.” His gaze darkened. “Would you like to go home? I’d like to see you naked in my bed, and love to sleep beside you.”

Louisa bit her lip. “As long as we can come back here one night.”

He grinned. “I’ll ask Madame Helene if she’ll renew my membership. If you are included, I’m sure she’d be more than happy to oblige.”

“And you’ll ask her about my medieval knight?”

He pretended to groan, but she knew he was intrigued by the idea. Louisa smiled at her husband, the man not only of her reality, but of her dreams. And what possibly

could be better than that?