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An Excerpt From: A LADY IN WAITING

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Sylvie, the Dowager Marchioness of Bartlebyrne, was tired. She hadn't slept a full night since she'd done it. She couldn't even bring herself to put a name to it she was so horrified and ashamed of her behavior. She rubbed a finger over the furrow between her eyes. The last few weeks she'd grown old beyond her thirty-nine years, watching the lines form on her face where once the skin had remained smooth and youthful. Gray hair now infused her light blonde locks. Apparently all the gossip and dire warnings were correct—illicit sex was not good for women of good breeding.

She sighed and sipped her tea, looking out over the veranda and down to the exquisite gardens of The Byrne, the beautiful family estate in Kent. It wasn't as large as the main family seat in Northumberland, where the marquis traditionally resided. Her son Geoffrey would take up residence there when he finished his studies in a year or two. He had told Sylvie she should consider The Byrne her home until she wished otherwise. All major decisions concerning the estate were hers to make. It was the greatest gift she'd ever been given besides her son himself.

She fidgeted, waiting impatiently for her guest to arrive. As she had taken great pains dressing this morning in anticipation of his visit she'd realized with mortification that she was infatuated with him, with the new vicar Mr. Edmund James. She'd almost removed the new raspberry pink gown she was wearing. It was too young, and made her feel like an old woman trying to recapture her youth and doing nothing but embarrassing herself over a younger man. Lord knows she'd seen it often enough. And therein lay the seeds of her discontent. Not only had she had sex with a younger man three weeks ago, a younger man for whom she had no feelings whatsoever, a younger man who was in her employ, but she was now infatuated with a different younger man completely beyond her reach. And she felt like sex with her coachman John had been a betrayal of her feelings for Edmund.

Mr. James, she meant Mr. James. Her head fell into her hand as she rested her elbow on the table, uncaring of the impolite nature of the gesture. Working so closely with him the last few weeks on establishing his new living here and her work for the parish charity house had not helped the situation.

When her husband's old friend Mr. Horton James had contacted her about the possibility of his son Edmund taking the available living in the village of Byrnham, Sylvie had been more than happy to offer it to him. According to Mr. James, his son had gotten in with the wrong crowd during his school years and as he'd gotten older his

antics had taken a decidedly rakish turn. Mr. James hoped that removing him from London and giving him the responsibility of a parish would cure that problem and bring out the sensible, noble side of his nature that his family had always recognized. Being the mother of a rather precocious son herself, she was willing to give Edmund James a chance.

Then he had walked into her drawing room and her entire world had tilted dangerously on its already precarious perch. He was one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen. The spark in his midnight blue eyes made it easy to see why so many women had fallen prey to his charms. Dark blond unruly curls far too long for fashion surrounded a face of male perfection, with fine cheekbones, a long, aquiline nose, and a large, expressive mouth. He was taller than any gentleman Sylvie had ever met, taller even than John the coachman. She hadn't realized she liked tall men until recently. Tall and muscular, if the form outlined by his tight breeches could be believed, and Sylvie believed it, fervently.

She thumped her head on her palm several times in disgust at her wayward thoughts. "If you have the headache, my dear, I can return later. Although I don't think hitting yourself in the head will help."

Sylvie jerked her head up, startled. It turned to embarrassment when she saw Edmund, Mr. James, damn it, looking at her with a small lopsided smile and quirked brow. Just the sight of him made her nipples peak and her pussy clench as she felt her sex grow wet. Why oh why did it have to be him? Why couldn't she have an appropriate infatuation on one of the older, eligible gentlemen in the region? Why this young man, a young man dependent on her, a rake trying to reform, a man who looked at her as if he wanted to devour her inch by slow, excruciatingly pleasurable inch?