



Another Door

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Mia Reading adjusted her mask as she peered over the ballroom. Lady Clement's annual masquerade was in full swing. Ladies in provocative gowns and daring masks reeled by on the dance floor in the arms of equally anonymous gentlemen. She couldn't help but notice that sometimes the hands of the dancers sat slightly lower than they normally did, as if the masks gave them all a sense of safety. Like they could behave as they pleased without Society's censure.

She supposed it should have shocked her, but in truth, Mia found the entire exercise utterly boring. The laughing ladies, the leering gentlemen, the loud music, the masks, the costumes . . . it all seemed so . . . *tedious*.

"You are frowning."

Mia turned to see her best friend, Elena Holyfield, at her elbow. Her friend was decked out in a mask to represent the goddess Hera, while Elena's husband, whom Mia could see in the crowd, was the fearsome Zeus.

"I am merely tired," she lied with a forced smile.

Her friend arched an incredulous brow.

Mia sighed. "I haven't attended such a party in a long time. Coming out of mourning is a strange thing. I'm simply not accustomed to it yet."

That, at least, was true. She had loved her husband very much, and she missed him still. And though his death after a long illness had not been a surprise, it had been painful. Now all Mia could do was try to rearrange the pieces of her life.

"You once liked these sorts of events," Elena pressed, taking her hand. "You were the center of it all. The very definition of a diamond of the first water."

Mia pursed her lips. "Yes, I know. But I just . . . I'm not the same person I was back then. Certainly, I'm no longer the center of attention, nor do I really want to be. I'm simply not sure *who* I am anymore. Since Terrance's death—"

Elena squeezed her fingers gently. "Time will ease the pain. And you will find a new place. It could be an adventure to reinvent yourself."

"Perhaps," Mia laughed. "There is something bewitching about the idea of becoming a new person."

Elena nodded. "You are financially secure, you do not require a husband. You could become fabulously eccentric and shock the matrons. Or perhaps you will have passionate affairs or secret trysts!"

Now the laughter bubbled free from Mia's chest. "Me, secret trysts? That, I cannot imagine."

Still, the idea wasn't unpleasant. It had been so very long since someone touched her. But she couldn't imagine being so bold as to seek out a lover, even if she knew other widows who had done so.

The orchestra began to play a new song. Loud and wild music made Mia flinch. "I'm going to take a stroll. Perhaps a little quiet time will put me in better spirits."

Elena nodded. "But I don't recommend the gardens. I saw a group of slightly drunken officers head that way. You'll have no peace if you're forced to endure their bawdy tales."

Mia smiled. "Thank you, I will take a walk in the hallways instead, then. Lady Clement always did have lovely taste in artwork."

"Find me when you return," Elena called after her as she began to make her way toward the ballroom doors.

Mia waved to her friend as she slipped out into the hallway. She made her way through a smattering of overflow party guests and past the servants who bustled around, attending to the revelers. Finally, the hallways grew quieter, the buzz of music and talk dimmed.

She drew in a sigh of relief. Ah, to finally be alone. She clasped her hands behind her back and slowed her pace. Staring up, she examined the lovely portraits and landscapes lining the walls. The weight she'd felt on her chest in the ballroom lifted, leaving her relaxed.

At the base of the main staircase that led to the family rooms, Mia stopped. She could see a few more paintings up above. Lady Clement wouldn't mind if she took a peek. She'd always been so proud of her collection.

Climbing the stairway, Mia moved through the family hallway, pausing to look here and there at the pieces that particularly struck her.

She was almost to the end of the hallway when a door flew open. Before she could react, a hand darted out, caught her arm and drew her inside a dim chamber. Then the door slammed shut again.

Mia found herself crushed against a very broad, very muscular chest. Her captor smelled of sandalwood and spice, with perhaps the slightest hint of fine brandy.

"What took you so long?" the man asked, close to her ear. His rough voice reverberated against the sensitive skin there. Shocked, Mia could only open and shut her mouth. What in the world was happening? And what was he doing with his hand?

Strong fingers slid up her rib cage, stroking a path toward her breast. Despite the shock of the situation, Mia's body reacted. Her nipple instantly tingled and her knees began to tremble. Dear God, it had been such a very long, long time.

"Wait—" she murmured weakly as those hot, strong fingers finally danced over the bodice of her gown. To her humiliation, her nipple beaded, pressing against the layers of silk. The fabric was so thin that it could not conceal her reaction to the stranger who held her.

"Mmmm," her captor groaned as he rubbed his thumb in a slow circle over the nub. "You know I hate to wait."

Then his mouth came down. His hot lips burned against hers, his tongue forced passed her lips and he took . . . claimed. And Mia . . . melted.

She didn't want to melt. She hadn't intended to melt. But she did. Her body sagged as he did wild and wicked things with his tongue. He tasted every inch of her mouth, he teased her tongue, made her aware of every sensitive part of her lips. She found her fingers winding their way around his jacket lapels as she hung on for dear life.

"My God, you taste spectacular," he groaned as they broke apart. "I've been waiting for this all night. And I've brought everything I promised, my little minx."

He pushed her back against the door and forced her legs apart with one knee. Mia was too much in a haze to protest as his hot lips moved to her throat and he suckled his way along the slope of her collarbone to make a leisurely path down to the swooping neck of her gown.

But her mind was still fighting for purchase, even as her body grew hot and wet with desire she'd long been denied. This man, whoever he was, didn't know who she was. He thought she was another woman, one he'd planned this tryst with. That woman might be his mistress, his lover . . . great God, she could be his wife!

Mia blinked as she pressed her hands against his chest and pushed. "No, no wait!"

A low chuckle was his reply. "Want to play games, do you? Do you want to pretend you don't want me after all your teasing? Well, Aidan Maitland doesn't take mock no's for an answer."

He claimed her mouth a second time, and Mia's protests were lost. But this time her mind stayed sharp.

Aidan Maitland? Of course. She recognized his voice. That wickedly seductive voice. The man was rumored to be the best lover in England. A man who gave shattering pleasure and indulged in secret vices. He was *not* married. He didn't even have a consistent mistress. Just flitted his way from lover to lover, leaving sighing, satiated women in his wake.

Mia moaned as he sucked on her tongue, drawing her attention back to the sensations that were burning her alive. How long had it been since someone had his hands on her? Kissed her like he wanted to devour her? It was before her husband's illness, that was certain. Over a year, perhaps closer to two. And now Aidan was reaching around to cup her

backside, was pulling her tight against him until she felt a very large and very insistent erection pulsing against the cleft of her thighs.

Did it matter if he didn't know her true identity? The room was dim, they both wore masks. Why couldn't she just take the pleasure he meant for another woman? Have her "secret tryst" and never let him be the wiser?

The decision was swept from her hands when he grabbed her waist and spun her around until her chest was flat against the door. He pinned her arms above her head with one big hand, rubbing against her from behind as he nipped at the sensitive shell of her ear.

Mia whimpered as sensation mobbed her again. It seemed like all of her sleeping nerve endings were being jolted awake by the demanding hands and mouth of this man.

"Your hands," he murmured in her ear. "Keep them up there or you'll be punished."

Mia tensed. *Punished*. She should have recoiled from the promise, but instead she grew even wetter at the delicious thought of being at the mercy of a man who didn't even know her true identity. She was tempted to disobey just to see what he would do, when he swiftly untied the laces of her mask and tossed it aside.

Tensing, Mia prepared to be found out, but instead of turning her to face him, Aidan wrapped a black, silk sash over her eyes. It covered half her face, concealing her identity even better than her mask had.

"Now lean forward," he ordered, pressing on the small of her back until she arched. He immediately began to unlace her gown.

This was her last chance to reveal the truth. But as Aidan's

masterful hands made quick work of the fastenings, she didn't feel any true desire to end the encounter. Just a nervous thrill about what would happen next.

"Naughty girl," he growled as he pulled her dress open in the back. "You wore undergarments. I told you not to."

She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, she felt a sharp slap on her backside through her gown. She yelped, jumping away from the unexpected strike.

"Be still," he snapped, wrapping a hand around her waist to hold her steady. "A little punishment is exactly what you need."

He slipped his hand into the gap in her gown and pushed up the cotton chemise beneath until he touched her bare backside. He massaged the flesh there, lightly caressing the swell of her bottom.

Mia bit her lip to hold back a groan. It was like his fingers were magic, designed to give her pleasure with every touch.

He ballooned her dress out and gave her another light slap, this time against her bare skin. His fingers lingered after, stroking the delicate flesh.

Mia arched, lifting her hips in silent offering.

"You'll never disobey again, will you?" he asked, his voice softer now.

"No," she whispered, her voice rough.

He cupped her bottom with one hand, then slipped his fingers out of her dress. "Turn around."

Trembling, Mia did as she'd been ordered. She could *feel* him watching her, though she couldn't see anything through the thick blindfold. She heard rustling and then the thud as his mask hit the floor.

"I want you to remove your clothing."

She shivered. Her husband had never had her make a show of undressing, though they had certainly been comfortable naked together. Still, no other man had ever looked upon her like that. The idea of this wicked man being the first since Terrance was a thrill.

Mia slipped her dress and shift away in one motion, inching both down her arms until the fabric gaped and fell away from her breasts.

Heat flooded her face. Was he watching her? Did he like what he saw? Had he realized she wasn't the woman he had intended to seduce?

"All the way off," he whispered, and the rough quality of his voice gave her some of her answers. He *did* like what the dim light revealed.

She shucked the dress away, kicking it aside so that she stood utterly naked in front of him. It dawned on her that instead of being embarrassed by her nudity, she felt empowered. Aidan Maitland had no idea who she really was. That fact made her bold. She thrust her breasts out triumphantly, smoothing her hands along her flat stomach in a teasing fashion.

Aidan moaned softly, and she smiled. This was the most sought after lover in Society, and yet she could make him groan. *Her!*

He caught one hand as she smoothed it down in a suggestive motion toward the juncture of her thighs and yanked until she stumbled forward against his chest. Hard and hot and now as naked as her own. While she was undressing, he must have done the same.

Immediately her hand found his hard stomach and she began to trail downward. She wanted to touch him. To feel the length of him.

He didn't allow for it.

"Not until I tell you to!" he ordered as he guided her a few steps backward. She felt the hard, cool wood of the bed's footboard touch her bare backside and sucked in a breath at the sensation.

"Turn around."

Mia tensed. This man was rumored to be dominant. In the real world, he was certainly overpowering. But his past lovers had said he liked to take charge. Demanded their acquiescence and gave ultimate pleasure in return.

But could she give in to such forceful demands, when his touch was nothing like the physical relationship she had experienced before?

"Now," he said, and she found herself turning around despite her misgivings.

Though Mia wasn't accustomed to being ordered about, to her surprise it didn't chafe. Instead, it made the heat inside her grow tenfold. To know he would take control, take charge . . . take her in every way he desired . . . She shivered at the thought.

"You are not being as obedient as I first thought you would be, sweetling," he murmured, his hot chest coming down against her back. The weight of him pushed at her until she braced her hands against the footboard of the bed and bent over. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, cupping her breasts, plucking at her nipples until she couldn't hold back a cry. "I think you deserve another punishment."

She shivered, but found herself nodding as she surrendered herself to his wicked games. "Oh, yes. Punish me."

"Hold still," he whispered, and then his body was gone, pulled away.

Mia wanted to stand up, pull at the scarf over her eyes, find him and see what he was doing. But she knew instinctively that if she revealed her true identity, the encounter would likely end. Or at least change. And she didn't want that. This anonymous rendezvous gave her freedom. She could be wicked and wild and free. She could be a slave to Aidan Maitland's desires and never question how it would change her in the light of day. Because it wasn't really her. It was the lady in the blindfold. The woman in the mask.

So she remained as she stood: hands gripping the footboard, bent over so her back was arched and her bare bottom lifted up in offering.

She heard Aidan move, and suddenly he was leaning across the bed. With swift efficiency he tied something around her left wrist.

Mia balked and pulled back against the tie, but it was firm. Her instincts took over and she pulled harder as she reached her unbound right hand over to free herself.

Aidan was up and behind her in a moment, moving with the speed of a cat. The flat of his hand stung across her bottom, and she moaned out a cry of pleasure-pain as his fingers stroked the stinging spot where he'd struck her. Then his fingers dipped lower and he spread her wet sex open. He ran his fingertips along the dripping lips of her pussy and then soothed the damp digits along the spot where he had spanked her.

Shocking sensations exploded in Mia. Being spanked like a child should not have made her weak with desire, but it did. When his hand struck her delicate flesh in that way, her body reacted like it had a mind of its own. Heat coiled low in her belly, and it made her even wetter with anticipation.

"I said hold still," he growled as he caught her free hand and tied it.

This time Mia didn't pull away. She allowed herself to be trapped this way, bent over and entirely at his mercy.

"You are far too spirited," he said, and withdrew the heat of his body from her. Mia wanted to beg him to come back, to touch her, but she bit her lip. What would he do if she simply went along? He had to take her . . . he had to!

"And I believe I have the perfect punishment for you," he continued.

"What is it?" she asked, once again wishing she could see whatever he was doing.

"I am going to give you such pleasure." The promise was low and seductive. "Such pleasure that you will never forget it. And every other pleasure will pale in comparison. But your orgasm belongs to me. If you come before I allow it, you will get nothing else. Do you understand?"

Mia swallowed. So she was to be tortured with pleasure? Her body ached with the thought. "Y-Yes," she murmured with a nod.

"Then we begin."

Aidan's voice moved closer, and Mia tensed with anticipation. He was going to touch her. In so many intimate ways. Except he didn't. Or not directly. The next thing she felt was the brush of a feather along her thigh. It was a light, tickling sensation that made her all the more aware of how sensitive her flesh was.

Mia let out a sigh, but the moment she did, the touch ceased.

"No noise."

She bit her lip. Dear God, she could make no outward

expression of pleasure? How would she survive? All she wanted to do was claw at the wooden footrest, scream and beg. She wanted to tell him to fuck her. Just take her and let her explode.

And now she could do none of it.

The feather returned, stroking little patterns on the backs of her legs, but always rising higher, coming closer to her sex with every upstroke.

She held her breath, she squeezed her eyes shut, she muffled every moan as he finally brushed the ticking feather across her slit. It was such a gentle touch, but it felt like an explosion inside of her. Her legs began to shake as pleasure ricocheted like a bullet inside her.

"So responsive," he murmured. "But don't come. Wait, sweetheart. Just wait."

She arched her back, leaning toward the tingling pleasure of the feather as he stroked it up and down the wet length of her opening. He teased the nub of her clit and across the puffy lips, he even brushed the tip along her bottom.

But then the touch was gone. Mia wanted to sob with his withdrawal. And yet she could make no sound whatsoever.

"You are being very good." His praise warmed her. "But you will need to be strong for a while more."

She held her breath as she waited for the next torment. It came swiftly. His hands again. He stood behind her. She felt his overwhelming heat, his powerful presence behind her. God, it would be so easy for him to simply press his cock deep within her and rut with her until she screamed.

He didn't. Instead he cupped her hips, his hands branding her. At a maddeningly leisurely pace, he stroked his fingers down, lower and lower, until he had reached her thighs.

Exerting gentle pressure, he spread her legs, opening her, exposing her sex completely.

Mia held her breath, waiting, wanting, knowing that moisture glistened in the dying firelight, feeling it trickle against her inner thigh. If he didn't satisfy her soon, she wondered if she would collapse from the anticipation.

To her surprise, he dropped to his knees behind her. And then he blew a gust of hot air against her exposed slit.

Mia forgot his order to remain silent. A moan burst free from her lips and she clenched her fingers so tightly against the footboard that she was surprised she didn't shatter the wood entirely.

Instantly, Aidan pulled back. The heat of his touch was gone, leaving her empty and aching.

"No more warnings," he growled. But she heard the urgency in his voice, the need that he was holding back. This might be an exercise in torture for her, but it was just as difficult for him.

She held her breath, silent as his mouth returned to the heat of her pussy. He blew hot breaths against her clit, toying with her, and then he licked. One hot motion that stroked her entire opening and buckled her knees.

He caught her somehow, supporting her weight as he dove headlong into his work. His mouth stroked over her, his tongue burrowed deep within her, his fingers and teeth played with her swollen clit. Mia swallowed back every moan, simply arching her back and digging at the wooden footboard.

But the pressure, the pleasure, was building. Burning almost out of control. She felt the release coming, she felt it in every hot and wet part of her. It was rolling up like an out of control phaeton, and she feared she wouldn't be able to keep herself from coming.

He must have sensed the impending explosion, for he pulled away just as the first tremors began. Mia's eyes flew open, not that she could see. Even if she could, she was certain her eyes would be blurred with the pleasure and the frustration.

Aidan was on his feet now, and the heat of his body hit her own like an inferno. He rubbed the tip of his cock against her wet opening, gliding her juices back and forth against her skin until she couldn't help but lift and thrust her hips back in a silent order to be taken.

Finally, he heeded that order. In one swift thrust he slid inside. She was so wet that he met no resistance, even though it had been so long since a man had been buried deep inside her.

"Good God, you're so tight," he cried out as his balls touched her sensitive outer flesh. "But wait, wait for me . . ."

She nodded, still silent. Even if she was allowed to say a word, she wouldn't have been able to. Just the feel of this man, stretching her, filling her, was too much. Every nerve ending in her body was at attention. And every time he moved, even just to take a panting breath, she moved closer to orgasm. Closer to heaven.

He pulled back, almost withdrawing entirely, and then thrust forward. They were slow, easy movements, but she felt the entire length of him. It was delicious torture, it was supreme bliss. Every stroke rubbed her perfectly, like he knew her body better than anyone ever had.

His strokes grew harder, faster . . . and his breath increased with each one. She felt him moving to the edge of reason, to the limit of utter control he had exhibited all night. Knowing that her body had done that to him drove her even

closer to release.

"Are you ready to come?" he asked, pressing hot kisses against her neck.

"Yes!" she cried out. "Please!"

His hand came around her waist and he spread her wet lips open. Instantly, he found the wet, swollen nub of her clit and began to work at her with his fingers. Mia arched back, thrusting her hips, drawing his cock in and tightening as he withdrew. Pushing toward the ultimate end of this unexpected, utterly powerful encounter.

"Come for me!" he demanded as he stroked her clit with one last perfect touch.

The order was the final permission she needed. In an explosion so powerful that she would have gone to her knees if not for the binds at her wrists and the man supporting her, Mia came. The orgasm rocked her, sent tremors through her entire body. She heard her screams echoing in the air, her hips thrust wildly. She milked his cock with her release and pushed him over the edge.

He dug his fingers into her skin, bit her shoulder gently and then howled out a sound of pleasure and pumped hot and hard into her body.

They remained like that for a long moment. He behind her, his arms wrapped around her, holding her up.

Mia's breathing slowly returned to normal, and the remaining tremors of pleasure ceased to wrack her body. But she was left with a light, weightless feeling brought on by the surrender, the pleasure.

Finally, he stood up. Still supporting her body with one hand, he made swift work of the tie on her right wrist. Mia leaned her weight more fully on the footboard as he set her

free from the other tie. Then, with more gentleness than she would have ever guessed he possessed after his dominance, he helped ease her to her feet, holding her steady when she staggered.

"Lovely," he breathed as he pressed a kiss against the inside of one wrist.

Mia sighed as she slipped her arms around his naked waist. She tilted her face up even though she couldn't see him through the blindfold. She expected him to kiss her, but instead he slipped his fingers beneath the edge of the scarf and pulled it away.

She smiled up at him now that dim light flowed over their faces. Good Lord, he really was handsome . . . and . . . and horrified.

She gasped. In the heat of the moment, she'd all but forgotten that he wasn't aware of her true identity. Now he stood staring at her, his face reflecting so many emotions she could scarce name them all.

"M-Mia? Er, Lady Walworth?" he stammered. "What . . . ?"

She swallowed hard. "I—I'm sorry. When you grabbed me, I tried to tell you." She fisted a hand against his chest and felt the wild beating of his heart. "But it felt so good. You felt so good."

His eyes narrowed, but the darker emotions that had flooded his face were gone. Replaced by a flicker of renewed desire.

"I never would have guessed, my pretty little widow, that you had such deception—" He leaned in and pressed a firm, hot kiss to her upturned mouth. "—and such fire in you. But you were . . . delicious. I may have to pull you into a private room again."

Mia leaned up and stroked her lips back and forth against his. For the first time since she came out of mourning, she wasn't confused. She wasn't lost.

"My dear Mr. Maitland," she whispered as she slipped from his arms. "What makes you think I won't be pulling *you* aside?"

About the Author

Jess Michaels flips through every romance she buys in search of "the good stuff," so it makes perfect sense that she writes erotic romances where she gets to turn up the heat on that good stuff and let it boil. She loves alpha males, long-haired cats (and short-haired ones), the last breath right before a passionate kiss, and the color purple (not the movie... though that's excellent, too—she loves the actual color). She firmly believes that Cadbury Cream Eggs should be available all year round and not count against any diet.

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