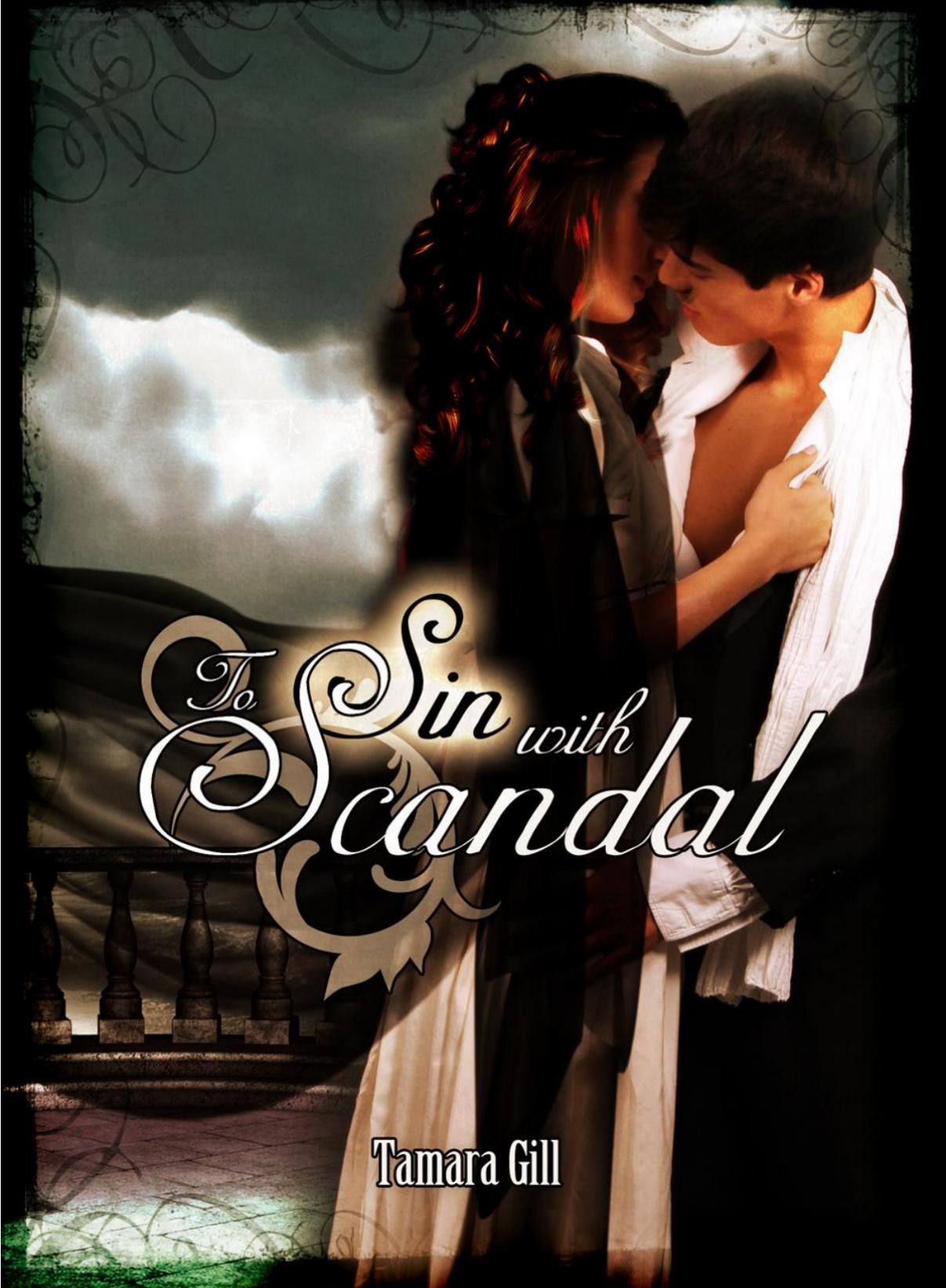


Noble
Romance

Naughty Nibble

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has long, dark, curly hair and is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, dress. The man has dark hair and is wearing a white shirt that is open at the collar. They are standing in front of a stone balustrade. The background is a dramatic, cloudy sky with a bright light source, possibly the moon or a low sun, creating a soft glow. The overall mood is romantic and sensual.

*To Sin with
Scandal*

Tamara Gill

www.nobleromance.com

To Sin with Scandal

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Book Blurb

One night of passion with the notorious rake, Lord Scandal. Every need satisfied, nothing expected in return. All Lady Miranda Fitsimmon has to do is keep her rendezvous with the man secret from the ton and her heart inured to the memory of their past.

Lord Scandal, otherwise known as Lord Sedley, no longer desires such meaningless liaisons in the ton. His taste for bed sport has changed. He only desires one woman to warm his sheets. And when the woman he thought never to see grace his home walks into his library and expects all her desires to be sated, his resolve to redeem himself is tested.

Can one night of sin give them both what they crave the most? Or will past wounds be too deep to forgive and forget?

To Sin with Scandal

By Tamara Gill

Chapter One

London 1805

"Please, hand me the invitation, Anna." Miranda added a hint of warning to her tone, which her headstrong, sometimes selfish friend, chose to ignore.

Anna fanned herself with the card. "Not if you intend to waste such an opportunity. You must promise me you will go. Lord Scandal does not bestow his favours on everyone," Anna said, with a pointed stare. "You must attend."

Miranda looked across the Lord Augustine Ballroom floor and watched the unsavoury rake ogle the widow, Lady Marshall's breasts. Extremely easy this night, considering the low cut of her gown. Lord Scandal, or formally known to the ton as Lord Sedley, was not a man to toy with. His dark, hooded eyes and cropped hair gave him the air of a man who took what he wanted and gave no quarter to the ton and their strictures.

But he had been so different once

They had been children then. New to the ways of the season and what society expected of them. New to what touches in the night by desired hands could do. Miranda thought back to the last night she was with him. Seven years. A lifetime ago.

Lord Sedley had courted her and lavished attention on her whenever a secluded corner or hidden closet presented itself. A smile quirked her lips at the memories of their trysts. Of how his lips, eager and hungry, would tempt her to sins no lady of eighteen years should ever commit.

"Miranda, love me," Sedley had said, pulling her onto his lap in a deserted parlour, the muted sounds of a waltz fading to insignificance when he moved his hands to lift the hem of her gown.

Miranda had chuckled at his antics. "Love you, dear sir," she said, clasping his

shoulders and looking down at him. "I thought I already bestowed such favours."

He pulled her onto his lap, and her legs straddled his. Wicked lips brushed hers with a fierce longing that left her breathless. "No. Not in that way." He adjusted her seat and brought her heated core up against his own, his hands kneading her bottom. "In this way."

Miranda bit her lip, as his hard and willing rod pressed against her sex. Delicious shivers she had come to crave ran from her core to spark in every part of her body. She clasped his dark locks and ran a hand over his chest and down until the semi-stretchy material of his pantaloons met her fingers. "You would love me before we are married?"

"I burn for you with every moment of my life," he said on a gasp when her fingers examined the hard ridge in his pants. Miranda squirmed as he pulled down the front of her gown and took one puckered nipple into his mouth. "Please," he begged, his voice wracked with need.

Unable to deny him anything, Miranda fumbled to free his pulsing manhood. A forbidden action that sent a tremor of fear through her when she noted his size. Was it even possible, this loving between two people with . . . that? All trepidation had dissolved when he took her lips in haste, his tongue swirling with her own, dragging her along into a firestorm of desire.

The head of his penis brushed her curls, and Miranda moaned at the velvety stroke.

"Miranda"

She clasped his shoulders and lowered herself onto him, the large head stretching her at the most private of parts. "Merrick, you're too large."

He rolled her onto her back and came up against her. "No, we'll fit, I promise." He paused, his face marred with concern. Fear. "Please, let me try. I will be careful."

Miranda lifted her knees to hook her legs around his hips. "I trust you," she said, and tried to relax, knowing he would never intentionally hurt her.

The door handle turned.

"Miranda? Are you in here?" Both of them stilled at the familiar voice of her mother. "Lady Mont, are you sure you saw my daughter enter this room?"

Sedley met her terrified gaze while he tried to hide them farther into the depths of the settee, its back the only thing between her and ruin.

The woman with her mother sighed. "Perhaps I was mistaken. Shall we try the library, my lady? Your daughter is fond of books, is she not?"

The door closed with a snap, and Miranda pushed Sedley off and jumped to her feet. She pulled at her bodice and covered her breasts, then settled her skirts about her ankles. "We cannot do this, my lord. If you wish for more, you know what you must do."

Sedley ran a hand through his hair, sighed, and slumped back into the chair, his still engorged penis jutting up against his stomach. Miranda averted her gaze to his face and tried to ignore the heat on her skin. "I have a meeting tomorrow with my uncle in Kent. I shall be free the day after to call on your father, and you, if you would do me the honour?" he said.

Miranda knelt before him and cupped his stubble-roughened jaw. "You mean to be mine, my lord?"

"I do," he had told her and kissed away her tears of joy.

It all should have ended well with a betrothal and a marriage in the coming days and weeks. And yet, not twelve hours later, the future she longed for was shattered by seeing Lord Sedley in a clandestine meeting with another woman.

Miranda pushed away the memories that stabbed at her like a knife and put her mind to the daring plan Anna proposed. A shiver ran over her skin when Lord Sedley's cold, calculating gaze met hers, and her stomach clenched. Miranda swallowed and looked away, cursed herself for a ninny when she did so. Tomorrow night she was to seduce him and tonight she could not even hold his eye? She shook her head at her own pathetic antics and snatched the card from Anna's hand.

Her friend smiled and sipped her champagne. "Remember what I told you. Explain I was unable to attend, and I wished for his lordship not to go unsatisfied."

Heat stole up Miranda's cheeks at the implication of the words. Aware she was gaping, she shut her mouth with a snap. This is what she wanted, after all. One night with . . . *him*.

Anna laughed. "Oh, don't be such a prude. At least you're no longer tied to

the sanctity of marriage. Pity my husband wouldn't expire early like Lord Fitsimmon and leave me a wealthy widow. Why, could you imagine all the fun I could have then, my dear?"

"What should I do if he refuses to . . . that is to say . . . ?"

"My dear Miranda, have you seen what a delicious morsel you are for men who give meaning to the word, 'rake'? With your dark, bountiful locks and beautiful skin, well, what's not to like?" Anna paused and threw her a searching gaze. "And anyway, did I not hear some years ago Lord Sedley was sweet on you? So much so, the word 'marriage' was mentioned?"

"It does not signify what was between me and his lordship. Our friendship was a long time ago, and Lord Sedley made it plainly obvious his desires lay elsewhere."

Anna patted her arm and chuckled. "You should not always believe what your eyes tell you; I find they can blind you at the most inappropriate moment." She paused. "You never did tell what happened. Care to enlighten me?"

"No," Miranda said, nodding to a passing acquaintance. "I would not."

Her friend sighed. "Miranda, dear, it seems to me your previous relationship with Lord Sedley was not pleasing. So why do you wish to bed him? I mean, I have no qualms handing over my invitation to you, but if he will only cause you heartache, I strongly recommend staying away. Why not seek a man with whom you have no unpleasant history for such a rendezvous?"

Miranda took a sip of champagne and flicked a glance in Lord Sedley's direction, watched another man's wife trail a finger suggestively down his arm. He made as if to turn to her but stopped himself. "Sedley cannot continue with this scandalous life forever. It may be my only chance to sample lovemaking with an experienced man. He — " Her words faltered when Lord Sedley caught her watching him still.

"He what?"

Miranda turned her gaze toward the dancing couples. "Lord Sedley refused to see me when I requested he call soon after my mourning ended. I made a terrible error of judgement many years ago, and he has not forgiven me. If I'm admitted into

his home, my wishes for the night obvious, surely he would not turn me away."

"So, you have heard the rumour." Anna pulled her toward two chairs, partly hidden by a large, potted fern, and sat.

"That Lord Scandal is putting aside his scandalous life? Yes, I've heard," Miranda said, lowering herself to the second chair.

Anna gave her a comforting smile. "And you are frightened he has attained a tender for some other lady, and your chance to be with him may be at an end?"

"Yes." Miranda blinked back the tears that threatened. The thought of another woman married to him and having his children tore her in two. It would be too hard to bear.

Anna smiled. "Lord Scandal will not turn you away, Miranda. Why, even now his eyes are undressing Lady Cavendish. No, Lord Scandal is still a thorn in every husband's side and perhaps will continue to be so for some time yet. And you will end the night in his bed, sated beyond your imagination, I promise you."

Miranda's mouth dried at the concept, and she prayed she was up to such a folly with a man who had once broken her youthful, foolish heart.

Lord Sedley looked over the crowded ballroom with a disinterested air. No woman present sparked an ounce of interest in him. Well, perhaps one.

Lady Miranda Fitsimmon was as beautiful and pure as always. Hair as dark as a moonless night, she sparkled like a diamond among paste. His gaze moved across to her friend, Lady Anna Cameron, and his eyes narrowed. No two women could be so unlike, and yet, fast friends they were, and reverently loyal to one another.

He swallowed a sigh of discontent and finished his brandy, relieved to have escaped Lady Cavendish. He should go home and forget this eve, this year, his entire life. Lord Scandal was at an end. No longer did he wish for one-night sex romps with women of his sphere. To give and receive pleasure for pleasure's sake no longer held the same excitement it once had. The whole process now palled, offended his sensibilities, hardened his heart, and led him to believe all women cheated on their husbands.

All but one.

"You'll make Lady Marshall and Lady Cavendish jealous if you keep eyeing Miranda Fitsimmon like you are. Do I suspect my brother is mooning over a woman?" Thomas asked, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

Sedley leant against the doorframe and ignored the taunt. "Sadly, you are mistaken. Lady Miranda is as cold as the Thames in winter." He beckoned a footman carrying drinks. "Where is Annabelle? I see the object of your constant mooning is absent from your side."

His brother grinned. "She says she is too large for polite company and refused to join me. I'm actually on my way home and noticed you standing here . . . alone."

Sedley met his brother's gaze. "Annabelle is only five months gone; surely she can grace the ton with her distinguished airs for a month or so yet," he said, trying to keep the sarcasm from his tone. His brother's next words indicated he had failed.

"She is my wife, brother. Do not mock what I suspect you yourself yearn for." His brother made an exasperated sound. "Do you not tire of this 'Lord Scandal' game you play?"

Sedley scoffed and winked at a passing debutante, grinned when she blushed scarlet and scuttled off like the big bad wolf was after her. "Your wife, brother, does not like me. Therefore, I believe I'm entitled to my opinion of her." He paused. "And why would I want a wife? Not a more heinous notion for a man such as myself."

"Heinous, yes, but one you would welcome nonetheless," Thomas said, clasping his brother's shoulder. "Tell me you are not going to continue this dalliance with Lady Marshall. She is only one month into her year of mourning. This disillusioned life and disgraceful reputation you have earned must end. One day you will sleep with the wrong woman."

Sedley watched his younger sibling walk off with a mix of envy and vexation. Damn his insightfulness. He sculled the last of the amber liquid. It was time to leave. Finish the life of Scandal, which, surprisingly, never sat well on his conscience. Tomorrow eve, when Anna arrived with those ridiculous cards he had printed, he would turn her away. And the rotten-to-the-core Lord Scandal would be no more. Instead, Lord Sedley, Earl of Moorabbin, would grace the ton for the first time as a

gentleman. And this time, not to find a conquest but to procure a wife.

Chapter Two

Miranda sat in the gloomy carriage and looked up at the imposing Georgian home before her; a flickering flambeau lit the distance from her carriage to the door. Nerves skittered along every line of her body, and at the slightest sound from outside, her apprehension over the night to come, left her jumpy and tense.

Not for the first time, she wondered what she was doing here. The Lady Miranda Fitsimmon did not sleep with men who had not vowed to love and to cherish her before God. And yet, here she was, before Lord Scandal's townhouse, frozen with fear.

She took a calming breath and nodded for her reliable footman to open the door. With her hood well secure about her face, she walked up the short flight of stairs, and, shutting her eyes, knocked.

The door opened immediately by a silent butler, who bowed and opened the door wider. Miranda, not wanting passersby to see her, took the opportunity to enter quickly.

The butler asked her to be seated and took the card she held out to him. The elderly retainer walked – or perhaps *hobbled* was a more apt description – toward the library. Miranda sat on a settee placed beside the spiralling staircase and waited. Would his lordship turn her away? Laugh at her and call her a fool for wasting his precious time, like he had all those years ago when she went to beg his forgiveness for her hasty actions? Her mistake?

"This way, m'lady."

The butler's loud command jerked her from the memory of her humiliation. Miranda pulled the cloak tighter about her body and prayed no one could tell she wore only the indecent silk shift beneath. No dress or strays. Just what God had bestowed on her and little else.

Each step she took toward the library felt like a step toward sin. And in reality, that was not far from the truth. Tonight, Miranda would sleep with a man

not her husband. Enjoy a virile gentleman of the ton who was renowned for pleasuring his women. From what Anna had said, sex could be most enjoyable. Miranda had yet to experience anything that would cause her to agree with such an assessment.

"Sit, Lady Cameron," Lord Scandal said, in a tone that—considering the nature of the tryst—in no way hinted at the desire one would think lurked under his superfine coat.

Miranda sat and had no opportunity to correct his lordship on the use of her friend's name before he spoke again.

"There is a matter I need to discuss." He stood before the fire with his back to her. The room, with only one lit candle, was full of shadows. Yet his lordship's tone is what skittered unease down her spine.

"I have made a decision that Lord Scandal is retiring from circulation. My desires, wants, and needs now arc toward a different life." He turned and met her disbelieving gaze. "I apologise, Anna, for wasting your time this eve."

Miranda nodded and wondered if she could accomplish her departure without revealing her identity. For years, she had craved Lord Sedley's touch, wanted to feel his large, masculine hands roam over her flesh. Taste his kisses on her lips. Finish what they had started so long ago. But her decision to act had come too late. Again.

"My Lady, are you well?" Lord Scandal asked, worry in his tone.

Miranda controlled her disappointment. "Of course, Lord Sedley. There is no need to apologise for wishing a normal life. We must all grow up eventually."

Sedley frowned at the choice of words from Lady Cameron's lips. Not normally a woman known for her acceptance of others, her words rang false, and so too did the tone in which she spoke them. Had he not known better, he would wonder if Lady Anna sat there, at all.

He took a step nearer to the woman who graced his library. The scent of roses wafted across the room; another hint the woman before him was not who her card said she was.

"Push your hood back. I wish to see you," he said, using a tone meant to soothe and yet an order just the same.

The woman stiffened, and, if anything, pulled her cloak tighter about her chin. "I should leave." She stood and walked toward the door. Without turning she said, "I wish you all the best, Lord Scandal, in whatever direction your life takes. You deserve to be happy. Goodnight."

He made the door at the same time she did and reached over her shoulder, slamming it shut. The scent he had not smelt for an age intoxicated his senses. Brought back the callow youth he'd once been before a disreputable life and scandal shadowed his every step. Before a mistake, not of his making, ruined his life.

Sedley pulled the hood from her head and breathed in the scent of her hair, summertime fruits, as he'd suspected. Instead of the chignon she favoured, this night she wore it loose about her slender neck, pulling his gaze over her shoulder toward her bountiful breasts.

He swallowed, and unable to resist, curled his hand about her luscious curves, welcomed her sigh and the warmth of her back as she leant into his embrace. Need thrummed hot and heavy in his blood. He wanted her, craved her like no other, and tonight, he would make her his as he ought to have done years ago.

His choice was wrong; he knew with every fiber of his being he should let her leave, move on with her life. But he could not, and his conscience pinched over his decision. Had he not vowed to give up this life, finish having meaningless sex with women he hardly knew? He wanted a wife. A woman of his own. A family. Miranda deserved more than a tumble in his sheets. Sedley ran his gaze over her profile, creamy white skin, straight nose, and succulent lips. At one time, he had wished for her to be his wife – not that he harboured such ideals anymore. Few would wish for a husband as tarnished as he.

"You should leave," he said, with no intention of allowing her to do so.

Miranda stiffened in his arms, her throat working in an almost audible swallow.

"Let me go then," she said, her words edged with steel.

His mind fought an inner battle over doing what he knew to be right and

allowing himself one night with the only woman he had ever loved. After this eve, she might walk out his door and not look back. His arms tightened about her waist, the temptation too much to forego. He would have her, this once.

Before she married someone else.

And Miranda was here, was she not? To sleep with him, fuck him like all the others. The image of her legs tangled with his while he drove deep into her hot sex, her breasts rocking with every stroke, made the breath whoosh from his lungs. And Sedley lost the battle to deny himself this night. He wanted her with a raw need that went beyond physical contact. No longer would he allow any excuse to keep them apart. Family, marriage, money, or reputation. Now that he knew who stood before him, he'd allow nothing to stand in the way of having her. Of loving her.

Miranda . . .

"Where are you going?" he asked as he skimmed his free hand over the silk chemise she sported. She gasped, and heat shot to his groin, making his cock strain against his skin-tight breeches. Unable to resist her bottom, he pushed his manhood between the globes.

"I thought . . . you said you wished for me to leave." Miranda answered on a moan when he tweaked her nipple.

"I said I wanted Lady Cameron to leave. I did not mention Lady Miranda Fitsimmon." Sedley nuzzled her neck and kissed the small freckle beneath her lobe. "I don't want you to leave." Never had he spoken truer words. And oddly enough, it did not scare him.

Miranda turned in his hold and met his gaze. Her wide, blue eyes searched his, for what, he wasn't sure. Perhaps the truth? He fought his devilish side that wanted to taunt the woman who had betrayed him for another, and yet the new Lord Sedley could not. He would not live another day without her.

"Why?" she asked, skimming his jaw with her fingertips. One sliding over his bottom lip as if she'd never seen a more delectable sight.

"Because I want you. Tonight." Always, although he could not voice such a word. In time, he would court her, win her love and marry . . .

But for this night, he would seduce her. The one woman he had always

wanted. Had once loved.

Miranda.

Chapter Three

Miranda should leave. For all of Lord Sedley's reassuring words and ardent touches, she was playing with fire. And her heart.

"This was a mistake," she said, settling the hood about her face and stepping back. The thought of all those women he had bedded raised her hackles. Every one of them had used his lordship for enjoyment, to while away the banality of society. He was sport for them and nothing more. It should have been she who warmed his bed. Loved him with her heart and soul. Oh, it was an irrational, stupid reflection, but one she had nonetheless.

"You don't want me?"

The unsure note in Sedley's question caused an ache to settle in her chest. Of course, she wanted him. Had wanted him from the first day she had met the dark-eyed, handsome gentleman on a picnic at Richmond. She studied his immaculate attire, the crisply starched cravat. Such a gentleman on the surface but what hid beneath? Hard as such a realisation was to admit, she no longer knew. She met his gaze, and the desperate yearning she saw there crumbled to ash her resolve to leave.

Unable to deny herself this night, Miranda leant up and kissed him. Life was too short to make another mistake, one she might regret forever. His lips, soft at first, turned punishing, ravished her mouth with an abandonment she welcomed and mimicked. His tongue teased her own, his teeth nibbling on her lips. He drank from her as if his life depended on her favours. She knew her future could possibly hinge on what happened this night between them.

She gasped and chuckled when his strong, muscled arms lifted her and carried her to a settee made for coupling. He skittered his hands over her body, leaving fire in their wake. Miranda undulated beneath him, moaned when he touched her most private part, circling the little nubbin hidden in her wet folds.

"Do you like that?"

Miranda clasped his hand to ensure he did not stop. His knowing chuckle against her neck then lower on her chest heightened her desire. She ran a hand through his short locks and shut her eyes. Never had she known such pleasure. Such care and petting were never part of her couplings with her dearly departed husband. Or perhaps, *just* departed. All consideration of her past sexual experiences dissipated when his lips sought her nipple through the silk of her gown, and he kissed her.

"Yes, I like it." Her nails scraped his skull when he left her sex to run his hand down her leg. "I always welcomed your touch." He clasped the hem of her gown and slid it upward. The cool air of the library served only to add heat to her body as he slid the silk toward her waist. His callused hand pushed her leg outward, and he kneaded the delicate skin of her inner thigh.

Moisture flooded her core when his hand grazed her sex without any material impediment, and Miranda thought she might dissolve into tiny fragments of bliss. So long since she'd felt this fire. This need thrumming through her blood. His fingers resumed their stroking before one, then two, entered her in one fluid move.

Sedley groaned. "So tight. I'm looking forward to breaking you in to my size, Miranda." He leant over her and met her gaze. His eyes, shadowed by the longest lashes she'd ever seen, looked at her with longing and maybe . . . regret. "You're as tight as a virgin."

She wrapped one leg about his hip and pulled him down for a kiss, wanting all and everything he could offer her. His tongue teased her own before his lips skimmed her chin, neck, breast . . .

"What are you doing, Sedley?" Miranda sat up on her elbows and looked at him in horror as his kisses ventured farther down her body. Sedley nuzzled her navel, his eyes glinting up at her with wicked intention.

"Call me Merrick." He kissed her upper thigh. "You once loved calling me by my given name."

Miranda bit her lip when two fingers delved into her aching center, moving with an expertise that tantalized and left her senseless while his gaze remained glued to hers. "If I recall correctly, my lord," she panted, "you refused me such a

liberty on my nineteenth birthday."

Sedley nuzzled her sex, and heat prickled her cheeks. "I give you leave to call me thus again. It's been too long since I've heard my name uttered by your lips."

Miranda flopped on her back when he slid his tongue down between her folds and flicked her nub. She clasped the pillows strewn about her, but nothing could stop her moan when his mouth blinded her to everything but this decadent pleasure.

"I want you so much," he said, kissing her stomach, then taking her sex once more to tease.

With wanton abandonment, Miranda let her legs fall open to allow him his way. Tension coiled within her, and grasping for stability, she clasped his head and grinded her body up against his face. All thoughts of propriety and decorum fled as Merrick pushed her into unexplored territory of sensations she had often heard talk of but never had experienced. Desire and need unlike anything she had known assailed her. His tongue swirled, flicked, and a heat spiralled throughout her body. She moaned and gasped his name, then shattered beneath him, allowed herself to go, to enjoy what Merrick did to her . . . for her . . . was still doing to her, as he continued to love her with his fingers while his lips and tongue drained every tingle and contraction her body could summon.

He chuckled and moved over her when she lay sated, a satisfied grin on her lips. She could not move had she tried. "I had no idea it could be this way between a man and woman," she whispered.

Sedley frowned and kissed her. "Did your husband not perform as one should? Did he not love you as I longed to love you?"

Miranda wiped the frown line from his brow and tried to ignore the pain she could hear in his voice. "Never."

"Stay with me, and it's all you will ever know."

It sounded very much like a promise.

Merrick kissed her uncertainty away and set to entice and arouse her once more. Would he ever get enough, now, that he'd had her? He thought not. She was

as fresh and pure as he imagined. A woman untouched by desire, thanks to an inept husband. But a denied woman no more. He would ensure this night that she would enjoy their coupling. So much so, Miranda would never wish for another.

He chuckled when she pushed at his chest and rolled him onto his back, straddled him, and lifted her chemise from her body. Merrick sucked in a startled breath as the woman above him revealed her bountiful, womanly body. Alabaster-smooth skin shone in the firelight. Her eyes sparkled with mirth and mischievousness.

"Perhaps it is my turn to pleasure you, my lord."

Merrick ground his hips against her wet sex and groaned when she rubbed her slick heat along his engorged cock.

"You want me, my lord? Want to take me with your large phallus over and over again?" She taunted him with her words while her hands stroked over his chest, his stomach, his

He clasped her hair and dragged her down to his lips. Letting her feel his uncontrolled, brazen desire, just what she did to him. She made him wild for her, made him ache in places he hadn't believed possible.

"Before I do exactly what you said, what pleasures did you have in mind, my Lady Miranda?"

She gave him one last peck on the lips before she slithered down his chest, her hair tickling his skin. Merrick groaned when she settled between his thighs and touched his engorged cock with a single finger. It jerked under her caress, and she smiled, or a better word for her features, planned. Savoured.

Her gaze met his quickly then moved back to what fascinated her so. He closed his eyes when five delicate fingers clamped around his shaft and stroked long and sure. His balls grew tight, and Merrick had an overwhelming urge to pull her head down on his cock and make her suck it . . . hard.

And yet, such action was not needed. For blessedly, the wonderful woman in his bed bent and licked the creamy nectar from his penis, then took him in her mouth. Exquisite sensations overwhelmed him. His legs shifted on the bed in the hopes he wouldn't disgrace himself and come in her mouth after such a short time.

But as her hand worked his lower cock and her lips and torturous tongue teased the head, that was exactly what he wanted to do.

But no. Not yet. Tonight, he would show her pleasure. Enough to keep her by his side for all time. Just as she was meant to be all those years ago.

"Stop." He begged when she took him deeper and faster into her mouth and sucked with the abilities of the best London courtesan.

She sat up and frowned. "Do you not like it?" she asked, worry in her eyes.

Merrick pushed himself up and pulled her onto his lap to straddle his legs. "Too much, Miranda." He kissed her and tasted both her and his essence in the kiss. "I want you."

Miranda searched his gaze and nodded. "Then take me."

He needed no further encouragement. In one movement, he lifted her and pulled her down to impale her on his shaft. Her tight core pulled at his cock with every stroke. Her whimpers forced him to increase the tempo; he fucked her with all the skill he could summon. Her breasts rocked against his chest, sending tremor after tremor of desire to his groin.

"Merrick, I—" She gasped.

He clamped his jaw when the first spasms of her orgasm started to flex about him. He continued the relentless ride and allowed her to shatter, did not cease his gorging of her until she was sated in his arms. Then and only then did he allow his own release to spill into her womb.

He came in a blinding light that seemed never to end. She clasped his shoulders and kissed him, then screamed as his climax brought on another for her. Merrick clamped down the urge to grin at his ability to bring her to orgasm once again. Before morning, she would come many times over.

Miranda slumped onto the settee beside Merrick and smiled up at the ornate ceiling. Never had she had such an amazing experience. Of course, when they were young, petting and kissing had been a given in their short courtship, but never anything as grand as what she just experienced. Although, on their last night together, hints of what was to come had teased her senses alive.

Left her longing for years.

She looked across at Merrick, who lay with his eyes closed, his chest rising swiftly with the lack of air. And a heart that had not lived for seven years started to beat once more in her chest. "I should have believed you."

Merrick opened his eyes and turned toward her. "What do you mean?"

"I should have trusted you would come when you promised you would. And yet, I panicked and agreed to Lord Fitsimmon instead. How you must have hated me." Miranda wiped a stray tear from her cheek.

His knowing sigh sounded loud in the quiet of the room. "My carriage lost a wheel on the road back from Kent, took an age to get it repaired. It was why I was late. Had I known you would accept the first marriage proposal you received, I would have asked for your hand the first night we met."

Miranda stared up at the ceiling, unable to meet his gaze. "I saw you the night before you were to call on me with Lady Mont and thought you were no longer interested. She being such a beautiful widow and you —"

"I was not a libertine then, Miranda." Merrick stood and reached for his shirt. Clasp the only thing available to her, Miranda held a pillow against her body and followed to where he stood. "You blame me for your uncouth life?"

He paused, then continued to button his shirt, walking to a window and staring out at the moonless night. "I did. But tonight, seeing you again, I realised I still love you. Always have, and perhaps just marked time until you were free of a husband who was not worthy of you."

A prickle of hope blossomed in her heart followed quickly with disbelief. "I requested you to call on me after my mourning was over. You refused. Why?"

Merrick turned and walked toward her, his gait that of a predator. He smiled down at her and pulled the pillow from her hands, his eyes heating at the sight. "I was angry." He shrugged. "I'm sorry I cannot give you any other excuse more pleasing."

Miranda snatched up one of her stockings and wrenched it over her foot. "You think I asked you to call to start what we never finished? It did not occur to you I needed a friend? A man I once knew who was kind and considerate of others? That

I thought you were such a man?"

Merrick's jaw worked as he stood silent, hands on his hips. "What was I to think? Lord Fitsimmon had been gone a year or more, more than enough time for you to get over his death. Was I mistaken?"

"Yes!" Miranda looked about the room for her other stocking. Spying it under the settee, she picked it up and sat. "I needed a friend, someone who knew me. I was lonely." She sighed and dropped her hands into her lap. "You love me?"

A smile quirked his lips at her change of thought. "Yes."

"But what of this life? Your reputation as a rake will be over should you take a wife." She paused, not sure how to say what she must. "I will not share you, Merrick."

"I had not known I'd mentioned marriage," Merrick said, one eyebrow quirked.

Miranda stood and looked about for her chemise, thanked the dim candlelight in the room that hid the heat on her cheeks. "I just assumed, since you mention love that marriage would be something you wished." She swallowed her mortification and slipped her chemise over her head.

"What are you doing?" he asked, frowning.

Miranda cursed her inability to locate her cloak. "Leaving." She watched him walk over to a decanter of brandy and pour himself a glass. He tossed it down his throat.

Merrick sighed, turned, and settled his annoyed gaze on her. "I lie."

Miranda halted her attempt at placing her hair into some semblance of order. "Lie about what, may I ask?" She dropped her hands to her side. Merrick poured another glass of the golden liquid and fear churned in her stomach, making her dizzy. Did he not love her? Did he regret this eve? Ever meeting her? What?

"Damn it, Miranda, of course, I wish to marry you. Your presence in the ton has been the veriest torture for me all these years. Sitting on the edge of ballroom floors watching your smitten husband fawn over you, dance with you, show his ardent love for all to see."

Miranda shook her head. "You cannot tell me you did not like this uncouth

life you have created. Scores of women begging for your attention, wanting to share your bed." She spotted her silk slippers and cloak, picked them up, and held them against her chest. "The night I caught you with Lady Mont, what were you doing?"

Merrick ran a hand through his hair. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it does," she said, glaring. "Lady Mont was the reason I accepted Lord Fitsimmon in the first place."

"So now you are blaming me for your marriage?" Merrick stormed toward her, and Miranda stepped back at the wild anger simmering in his green orbs.

"If you must know, my lady, I was informing Lady Mont of my lack of interest in her," he said through clenched teeth. "That her ladyship decided to drape herself over me while I did so was not of my making. The fact you sighted such a scene at that precise moment is unfortunate, but was not, in my estimation, worth jumping into a marriage for which you cared naught."

Miranda beat back the urge to chastise herself. She couldn't change the past. It was over. Done with. Best to move forward and find happiness. But the thought of him sleeping with all those other women vexed her and made the blood in her veins boil. "I suppose she was more than willing to fix your broken heart after I married Lord Fitsimmon."

Merrick shrugged and met her gaze. "Of course. What did you expect? That I would pine away and live a life of a bishop?"

Miranda had not expected him to, but she had wished it all the same. Her eyes tore over his chiselled chest, visible through the silk shirt he wore, the muscled vee pointing toward a part of him that could bring such pleasure to a woman, now hidden by his breeches. She licked her parched lips. "I had hoped," she said, her words barely audible.

"I love you. I have always loved you. Is that not enough? Have we not made enough mistakes we cannot find it in our hearts to forgive and move on? I wish to marry you, Miranda. I love you."

She dropped her cloak and shoes on a nearby chair and walked toward him. The warmth of his gaze and the truth behind his words went some distance in mending her broken, unsure heart. "Will this disillusioned life you have end? I

expect my husband to be faithful to me, as I will be to him."

His resounding chuckle sent shivers of delight across her skin. "My first words to you tonight were true. I care not for the life of a rake. My associations have ceased, and Lady Anna was to be the first to know. As luck would have it, the woman I wanted happened to arrive instead. Saved me a lot of trouble, I assure you." He kissed her lips and lingered. "Would it bother you to marry a man with a tarnished past? I promise I'll be faithful to you always. Please do not ever doubt my word again."

Miranda's knees wobbled. Would it bother her? Not if Merrick's words held true and remained so for the rest of their life. She smiled and wrapped her arms about his neck, allowed her hands to caress the corded muscles on his shoulders. "No."

"No, you won't marry me? Or, no, it doesn't bother you, I'm sullied?" Merrick's arms tightened about her waist, his uncertainty obvious in every feature of his handsome face.

"No, it doesn't bother me, Merrick. Even the matrons of the ton would agree; reformed rakes make the best husbands and fathers." She paused and gave him a pointed stare. "That is, *if* the rake is reformed."

He laughed and grazed her lips with his own. "I do believe I would make a wonderful father and of course, reformed husband." He nibbled her neck and kissed the sensitive skin below her ear, his breath tickling her desire to life. "If they take after their mama they will be the most beautiful children on earth."

Incomprehensible happiness swamped her; tears welled in her eyes at the notion of having a family, a future with this man. "Children?" she said, sniffing.

"Of course." Merrick picked her up in his arms and carried her back to the settee. "And before this night is out, I plan to have you with child. Enough time has passed. I do not intend to waste any more of it," he said, her chemise once more pulled from her body and floating to the floor.

Miranda grinned. Her one night of passion had turned into a promise of a lifetime of pleasure, and what a wonderful life she intended to make it.

Together.

~The End~

About the Author

Tamara Gill's love of history started from an early age, but her reading of historical romances only began when home on maternity leave with her second son. Her writing career started as a hobby but soon turned into an obsession; just ask her family, who have suffered many a whipped up, burnt meal. Membership in Romance Writers of Australia, Romance Writers of America, South Australian Romance Authors and the Beau Monde keeps her occupied and focused on her craft and the changing trends of readers. Tamara lives in the beautiful Barossa Valley in South Australia and enjoys hearing from readers and writers alike.

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