

Abigail's Earl

By

Starla Kaye

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Kaye, Starla
Abigail's Earl

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-3006

Cover Design by edhgraphics.blogspot.com

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Chapter One

London, August 1818

Abigail detested doing embroidery work. She glanced, for what seemed like the hundredth time, out the front window of her sister's drawing room. Oh how she longed to be out riding in Hyde Park or on one of her father's estates on this beautiful early August day. Yet here she was, trying again to teach the simplest of stitches to her sisters. A futile task at best.

If only she had something more interesting to do with her time. If only she didn't allow her family, particularly Ashlynn, to manipulate her so much. But now that her sister had married, she was attempting to conquer the skills of what her husband considered the more proper pursuits of a wife. And Catherine had been eager to do anything with her older sisters, even punching a needle through fabric to create some kind of design. So here Abigail sat, wasting another day inside.

"Blast it!" Ashlynn grumbled and tossed what she'd been working on down to the floor. She glowered at the pillowcase and put her injured finger to her mouth.

"I believe there is more of your blood on the linen than thread." Abigail couldn't help the quiet laugh that escaped. "I'm beginning to think this is *not* a craft you will master."

Catherine giggled, but wisely, otherwise didn't speak.

"We're twins." Ashlynn looked directly at Abigail from the settee where she sat opposite her. "You would think we should have comparable talents."

"Being twins doesn't mean we have the same interests or the same likes and dislikes. We are two very different people."

Abigail added another delicate stitch to the rose pattern she was creating on the hanky. She was sick to death of embroidering hankies, pillowcases, and table scarves. But her family believed she enjoyed sitting for hours on end making such nonsense. It was her fault, of course. She worked hard to portray the perfect young woman and be the perfect daughter. Yet no matter how prim and proper she behaved, no matter how she avoided making any kind of scene, so unlike Ashlynn, and no matter how predictably she did what everyone expected of her, it was Ashlynn whom the others adored. Well... adored and were often appalled at. Ashlynn had never conquered her curiosity for life, her spirit of independence, and her tendency to get into trouble. In contrast, Abigail excelled at hiding her true self.

"I can't be as utterly ladylike as you," Ashlynn said with a frown. "And I do wish His Loftiness would quit trying to compare you and me."

Again Catherine giggled and quickly lowered her gaze to her handwork.

Abigail, too, had the urge to giggle, but she valiantly contained it. Ashlynn often referred to her husband, the Duke of Ashcroft, as 'His Loftiness,' especially when irritated with him. From the way her sister had been squirming around on the settee, Abigail guessed that the duke had had words with his wife either earlier this morning or last night. He'd also no doubt applied at least his hand to her bottom.

As if sensing Abigail's thoughts, Ashlynn hissed, "I don't want to talk about our recent disagreement."

Heavy footsteps sounded outside the room, followed by the duke's deep voice saying, "Are you behaving yourself, wife?"

Ashlynn blushed, pursed her lips, and didn't bother responding. Instead, she reached down to pick up her embroidery work.

"Good morning, Your Grace," Catherine fairly gushed at her brother-in-law. She held out the tea cloth she'd been working on. "What do you think?"

He smiled in approval. "It's very nice, Lady Catherine." He glanced at the mess his wife was making of her piece. "Perhaps you could help your sister when you're finished with your project."

Ashlynn gave a low growl without looking up at her husband.

A rumbling male laugh came from behind the duke, and Abigail and her sisters all looked up curiously. They had thought the duke was alone, evidently not.

Blaine stepped aside and motioned a slightly taller man into the room. Camel trousers fit snugly over long, muscled legs. A black vest and burgundy tailcoat with a crisp white shirt and black tie spoke of his attention to the latest fashions. His handsome face, with its small indentation in his chin and a long, patrician nose, captured Abigail's attention. But it was his thick, deep brown, collar-length hair and sideburns that intrigued her. Foolishly, she wanted to run her fingers through his hair, to see if it was as soft as it looked.

Annoyed with herself, she focused on her handwork in her lap.

"Ladies, I would like you to meet an old friend of mine, James Ranborne, the Earl of Saliston." Blaine nodded toward them. "The one struggling with her embroidery piece is my sweet wife, Lady Ashlynn."

Ignoring her glower, he nodded at Catherine. "This lovely young woman is my wife's youngest sister, Lady Catherine Claymore."

When their gazes shifted in her direction, Abigail stiffened awkwardly. "And this beauty is Ashlynn's twin, Lady Abigail Remington."

James gave her a thorough appraising look and studied her hanky. "Evidently you are the master seamstress here," he said, sounding impressed and a bit amused. "Are you teaching your sisters?"

For some reason, she couldn't seem to find her voice. She settled for bobbing her head in agreement, and then quickly looked back down to her project. He made her nervous; at least her stomach was fluttering. He made her want to reach up and make sure her curls were still falling just right on her shoulder, which thoroughly irritated her. She did not primp for any man.

"Lord Saliston is the Lord Privy Seal and formerly the Lord President of the Council," Blaine sounded proud of his friend. "He has only recently returned from a trip to America."

That admission drew a look of sad envy from Ashlynn, who talked often about wanting to go there for a visit to her homeland.

Abigail, however, had no desire to go back there. The farm they'd grown up on had been sold. Her beloved mother was buried on their former land. Her entire family lived in England now. She had come to accept this new place as home.

James pulled a pocket watch from his vest and glanced at it. With a frown he said, "I'm sorry, ladies, but my time for visiting is limited." He looked squarely at Blaine. "Shall we go discuss the reason I stopped by here today?"

Blaine nodded and turned toward the doorway.

But before James shifted away, he smiled crookedly at Abigail. "Perhaps I will see you at one of the upcoming balls, My Lady. Mayhap you will allow me a dance."

Abigail's pulse raced and she noted the hint of flirtation in his hazel eyes. "Perhaps," she managed to say.

“She’s far too innocent for you, old friend,” Blaine countered, facing James once more, and then smiling gently at Abigail.

Too innocent! Abigail huffed in irritation. Even if she was quite inexperienced with men, she didn’t need her brother-in-law guarding her. But then, her father and brothers were just as bad. Because of them and their over-protectiveness she’d barely been kissed.

James took a second to move his gaze slowly over her again, making her fight down the need to fidget. His appraisal was bold and daring. What did he see? How did she compare to other women he’d...

She blushed and told herself how silly she was being. What did she care what he thought of her? Even though he’d mentioned them sharing a dance sometime, she doubted it would ever happen. She was almost certain she wasn’t anything like the women he would be attracted to. Nor did she care!

He gave her a devilish look, winking shamelessly at her. “Are you sure about that?” He teased. “I can see an underlying spark of fire in her eyes.”

“You’re quite mistaken, Lord Saliston,” Ashlynn asserted, sounding defensive and pinning him with a censorious glare. “I’ve finally realized just *who* you are. Your reputation as a politically powerful lord is well known. As is your rather, shall we say, infamous rake status.”

Blaine shot her a chastising frown, but James merely grinned and turned to walk out of the room. He hadn’t denied her claim. In fact, Abigail decided, he appeared to think it a compliment.

James followed Blaine into his study, barely glancing at the floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with books. He’d been here many times over the years. Admittedly, his visits to his friend’s home had all but ceased not long after he’d married Agatha. Then when she’d died while carrying his child, he’d withdrawn even more from most of his old friends in his determination to put anything to do with his horrid marriage behind him. Blaine had introduced him to Agatha. But Blaine had no idea the shrew the pretty brunette could be, no one had. She hid that side of herself well. Never again would he put up with such conniving ways, with someone who wasn’t totally honest with him.

“So what brought you here today?” Blaine asked, interrupting James’ unhappy musings. He took a seat in one of the leather chairs in front of his desk and looked at James curiously.

James took a second to gather his thoughts and settled into the other chair. “I need a wife, soon.”

Blaine cocked an eyebrow. “Finally tired of going from mistress to mistress?”

“This has nothing to do with that.”

James knew that Blaine disapproved of his lifestyle, although it wasn’t out of the ordinary for a single man or a widower. They both knew many lords who were long married and yet kept mistresses on the side. At one time, he wouldn’t have approved of such a situation. After his despicable marriage, and after witnessing many other equally poor ones, including that of his parents, he had decided it would be best to have both a proper wife for his social and political aspirations, as well as a mistress to satisfy his baser needs.

Blaine’s expression darkened. “Not all women can’t be trusted. Not all women...”

“I heard about the trials Lady Ashlynn gave you before finally agreeing to marry you. After all of that, do you truly *trust* her?” James heard the bitterness in his tone and hated it, but his inner wounds hadn’t healed. He didn’t think they ever would. He could never again let a woman have any piece of his heart.

“My wife can be a handful indeed, at times. She is quite independent thinking.” Blaine looked thoughtful and a smile slipped onto his face. “Yet she loves me. I have no doubts about that. And I can’t imagine my life without her, how boring it would be.”

James felt a moment of envy. He’d been hopeful in spite of his familial history when he’d fallen in love with Agatha. Their first year together had been...

No! He couldn’t go through anything like that again, *wouldn’t* do it. He should have known better than to think, even for a minute, about love. His parents certainly had never shown any hints of loving one another, but they’d had a good marriage in other ways. They’d tolerated each other and basically led separate lives. *That* was exactly what he intended to do with his next wife.

“It has been *suggested* to me many times recently, and before I went away for a month, that I should marry again,” James heaved a sigh of frustration. He wasn’t really ready to take on another wife, but, apparently if he wanted to continue rising in the political circles, it had become necessary.

Blaine studied him for a minute and nodded. “I will admit I’ve overheard mention of that notion. Most of the leaders in the House of Lords believe strongly that a man needs a supportive wife at his side, particularly for the numerous social functions he must attend.”

James decided to address the matter that bothered him the most. “I must also have an heir.”

He watched sympathy settle over Blaine’s face. His friend knew about the tragic circumstances surrounding Agatha’s death, how she’d had one of her fits of temper at a ball they’d attended. She’d railed at James on the dance floor for a reason he couldn’t, even now, make sense of. Then she’d loudly declared that she was leaving, shoved her way through the other guests, dashed out the front door, and fallen down the front steps. Only hours later she’d taken her final breath without awakening. Their unborn child had died with her.

“I understand,” Blaine finally said. “But are you sure?”

“It is necessary.” James stood, deciding he’d said enough. “I just wanted you to know what I’m planning.”

Blaine straightened and looked wary. “Although we’ve been friends for years, we haven’t been close in several years. Why did you wish to confide in me now?”

James thrust out his chin and boldly declared, “Because I’ve decided to marry Lady Abigail.”

“The hell you say!” Blaine’s expression turned murderous. “You don’t even know her; have only even met her this day.”

What Blaine said was true, but he’d seen her from a distance many times lately. She carried herself well. She had impeccable manners. And she was a pretty little thing who would look good beside him. Having met her in person only moments ago, he’d been impressed even more... particularly by that spark of fire he’d sensed inside her. Passion. There had been no real outward signs of it, yet he’d felt it. He looked forward to seeing the emotion unveiled, hopefully in their marriage bed.

Annoyed with the thought, he fisted his hands at his sides. He didn’t want his new wife to mean anything more to him than a mate for his social needs and a mother to his heir. He would have to be very careful in his dealings with Abigail. He would have to find a new mistress who would take care of his intense sexual needs.

“She will lack for nothing.”

“Except love,” Blaine quietly countered.

James felt his heart twisting at the pain his brief belief in 'love' had caused him. His tone flat, he said, "I will never allow myself to feel so foolishly again."

When Blaine looked sympathetic, irritation flashed inside him. He didn't want or need anyone's sympathy. "As my wife, she will have a good life. She will have the choice of any of my estates in which to reside and will be allowed to do pretty much as she pleases. All I will demand is that she portray the supportive wife, when necessary, in public." Even he realized how cold the words sounded, but he could offer her no more.

To his surprise, Blaine laughed.

James bristled. He saw nothing amusing in the situation.

"I believe you underestimate my dear sister-in-law. She may give the illusion of being the perfect, poised, submissive young lady;" he grinned, "but I believe she hides much about herself."

That gave James pause. He couldn't put up with a two-faced woman a second time. Still, he'd observed Lady Abigail a number of times, even casually inquired of others about her. No one had seen her as anything but a gentle lady with a quick smile and the utmost flawless behavior.

He met Blaine's eyes. "Will you get in my way of marrying Lady Abigail?"

Blaine's smile disappeared and he looked thoughtful for a few seconds. James fought back the urge to shift uncomfortably. He didn't want to destroy their friendship and he respected Blaine, as well as Abigail's father. But he'd made this decision and intended to pursue the matter with her.

"You are a good and decent man, in spite of your behavior these last couple of years. The Duke of Claymore knows that as well." Blaine held James's gaze and spoke grimly. "If I didn't believe that, I would, in fact, do all I could to interfere."

James drew in a relieved breath.

"The decision will be Lady Abigail's." He gave a hint of a smile once more. "I'm warning you, be prepared to be refused."

Feeling confident, James walked toward the doorway. "I can be quite convincing." As he walked from the room, he began thinking about his next step. He needed to get on with making her his wife, so he could go back to concentrating on more important issues. He would wed her, bed her, hopefully get her with child immediately, which he realized was unlikely, and settle her on one of his estates. He would bed her as many times as necessary until she carried his child, and then he would leave her alone. No doubt she would prefer that, too. She could lead her own life, as he would lead his.

Nearing the front door, he heard the three sisters laughing. Somehow he distinguished Abigail's from the other voices. Her laugh had a lightness to it, a warmth. His gut tightened. A strange longing shot through him. It worried him enough that he quickly left the house.

"I have a proposition for you, Lady Abigail."

Abigail nearly miss-stepped doing her part of the quadrille and looked up in surprise at her current dance partner.

"I beg your pardon," she said in confusion. She should have been paying more attention to both him and the dance, but she wasn't fond of either one.

The darkly striking Lord Saliston who towered over her by almost a foot frowned in annoyance. As he moved closer to her, he stated again, "I have a proposition for you. Something I would like to discuss with you in private."

She stiffened at his forwardness, even as her pulse raced. “That wouldn’t be at all proper, Lord Saliston, as well you should know.”

He quirked a thick eyebrow and gave her an arrogant look. “Nevertheless, we shall have a talk when this dance is over.”

As she returned to her corner of the square, she pinched her lips together and snorted. Then she glowered at him while the other couple repeated the dance figure they’d just finished. He dared to smile at her, quiet amusement lurking in his eyes.

Pompous coxcomb! Since their introduction at Blaine’s home over two weeks ago, she’d seen James at other balls and events around town. She had learned a great deal about him, picking up pieces of gossip from the servants and overhearing her brothers talking about him before they realized she was listening. He’d been widowed two years ago from what most believed to have been a loveless marriage. And he’d gone through more mistresses than any man should in a lifetime.

He’d never approached her for the dance he’d mentioned, until tonight. She should have turned him down, but good manners wouldn’t allow it.

Her thoughts returned to his blunt statement. *A proposition for me?* All sorts of wicked notions dashed through her mind, much as they’d been doing since first being attracted to him. Ideas like his offering to keep her in a very private townhome for their sinful times together. It would have a bedroom done in decadent reds, with lots of velvet and lace. He would provide her with a wardrobe suitable for a courtesan. Gowns with tight waistlines and necklines far lower than proper, low enough to display a great deal of cleavage. Most of their time together would be spent deliciously naked as he...

Abigail’s cheeks flamed and she had to focus on the floor. She’d spent too many hours reading those scandalous novels Ashlynn had managed to find, leave about, and now had abandoned with her marriage. Books that Abigail had re-read numerous times since her sister had moved out and the household had become rather staid and boring. She was burning each and every one of them tomorrow!

The beat of *Le Pantalon* changed, indicating it was time to begin the second dance figure. Her stomach churned with nerves. She didn’t want to get anywhere near the earl again, but manners wouldn’t allow her to walk away until the quadrille had finished. She would put on her best smile and pretend he hadn’t said anything that even hinted at impropriety.

Pulling in a steady breath, she eased into the required steps and went to meet the man who had walked boldly up to her almost the minute she’d arrived at her sister’s first hosted ball. He’d given a quick proper greeting to her father, brothers, and a mere glance to Blaine and Ashlynn. And then he’d taken her hand, his first act of misbehavior, which should have been a warning, and led her onto the dance floor.

When she glanced up at him, his demeanor depicted the confident man revered by the *ton*. But his eyes once more hinted at amusement... and maybe even awareness. *Good heavens!* Had he caught her blushing? Had he imagined her naughty thoughts?

She looked across the room toward the doorway where her father and Braden were visiting with several elderly widows who had a fondness for her father. In truth, she knew they had been trying to find him a new wife. He tolerated them, but wanted nothing to do with their attempts at matchmaking.

No, she didn’t want to go over there and get dragged into their conversation. She had no wish for the ladies to begin searching for a suitable husband for her. She had been struggling to keep her father and brothers from doing so, and to this point, she’d been successful. But she was

certain that, far too soon, they would turn away from the concerns with some estate problems that had come up and focus on her again. She would be quite content to never marry.

Pursing her lips and heaving a sigh at the distressing musings, she almost miss-stepped again.

The earl chuckled and moved within inches of her. He lowered his already deep, rumbling voice and said, "Your face is so expressive, Lady Abigail. Tiny lines crinkle around your mouth when you're irritated. Creases line your delicate forehead as you think." He grinned in teasing. "And your lovely cheeks pinken when you ponder sinfully naughty thoughts."

She froze and narrowed her eyes at him. "How can you possibly know about my 'sinfully naughty thoughts'?" Then she fisted her hands and groaned in frustration, realizing she'd just all but admitted he was right.

He had the audacity to laugh out loud and draw the attention of everyone on the dance floor. The music stopped and mortification surged through her. Her face flamed even hotter.

As he had leading her to the dance floor, he took charge once more. He nodded in apology at those around them and moved next to her. Close enough that she felt his heat, and drew in his scent of a sensually appealing aftershave that made her tingle from head to toes. Before she could gather the good sense to speed away from him, he put his hand at her waist and urged her from the dance floor. But instead of encouraging her toward her family, he guided her out the side doorway and into Blaine's study.

The instant her sanity returned, Abigail scurried out of his reach. Her shoulders rigid, anger sizzling through her, she hissed, "What do you think you're doing? You can't just..."

"Calm down, little one," he commanded. Although his tone had been quiet, it was clear he meant to be obeyed.

She had more than enough men in her life already, who ordered her around. Instead of taking umbrage with his attitude, she found herself snapping, "I am *not* little." To prove it, she stretched to her full, clearly unimposing, height and huffed.

His cocky grin returned and she detested the funny sensations that sped through her in response. Worse, her silly heart raced.

He sobered and went to lean a hip on top of Blaine's massive mahogany desk. "This proposition I mentioned earlier..."

"I will *not* be you mistress!" she shouted. Those debauched thoughts rushed back into her mind: being a kept woman, a love slave, naked and obedient to his every wish and command. She curled her fingers so tightly that her palms hurt. "*Not, not, not!*"

He folded his arms across his broad chest and swept his gaze slowly over her. "While you are definitely pretty enough, I prefer my mistresses to be more experienced." Devilry lit his eyes. "In the bedroom."

Would her cheeks ever stop burning? She'd misinterpreted his proposition, although she still didn't know what it involved. And he'd seemed to have to come up with 'pretty enough' in order to make her feel, somewhat, better. Then he'd honed in on her obvious lack of any kind of sexual experience. She wanted to melt away between the floorboards or disappear in a puff of smoke.

For some idiotic reason, she believed she needed to apologize. She ignored the heat of embarrassment that had spread over her entire body and tipped up her chin. "I'm sorry, Lord Saliston."

He gave a curt nod. "What I have in mind is complicated, but I think beneficial to both of us."

She couldn't imagine what this powerful man would want with her; even though her father was a well-respected duke, except for his three American-born children from his dead mistress, the love of his life, her mother. The *ton* had barely accepted her twin, now married to another powerful member of the nobility, the Duke of Ashcroft.

"I'm in need of a suitable wife."

She blinked in shock and her thoughts skipped backward. "Surely you don't mean *me*. After all that Blaine and Ashlynn went through..."

He met her gaze and held it. "Your father's status and power can't be denied. Through your tie to him, in spite of your being an American by birth, you become a valuable asset as a wife."

It galled her to be thought of as someone's 'valuable asset,' even if women really were little more than chattel. Her mother had never thought that way. Her twin had rebelled against it, until finally meeting a man she loved enough to overlook his occasional I'm-in-charge attitude. But Abigail didn't want to be basically owned by a man. A tiny part of her dreamed of love and romance, but she didn't see it happening to her. She would be content to be a spinster.

"No."

His brow furrowed, which seemed to make his aristocratic nose appear even longer. "I don't need or want a love match." He straightened, making her look even higher up at him. "I will provide you with numerous houses and let you choose where you wish to live, except for when I need you with me for certain social functions. You will never lack for anything. And you will have nearly complete freedom to do as you wish."

Not want a love match. Even though she had reconciled herself to living the life of a spinster, her heart twisted at his cold words. They would be no more than bare acquaintances. She would be used by him, for purposes of his own. *Used by him...* again, wicked images flashed into her mind. She had no idea why she kept thinking this way around him. She'd been around other handsome men, none quite as handsome, but still... She'd been flirted with, something which he hadn't even attempted. She'd even had a kiss or two stolen. Again, something he hadn't even shown signs of wanting to do.

Irritation threading through her, she latched onto his last words. "*Nearly complete freedom?* Exactly what do you mean by that?"

He took a second before he responded. "Because of my position and political roles, you would be expected to behave in a certain manner, a proper lady at all times."

She'd had her fill of being 'a proper lady at all times.' She'd kept tight reins on her adventurous, daring spirit. So tight, that no one in her family even suspected she had it. Unlike her sister, who had gone her own way and done as she pleased, only to suffer the occasional stropping or feel the flat of their father's hand on her bottom, Abigail avoided that unpleasantness as much as possible. But she'd gotten spanked and sent to her room only a week ago when she'd tried to go riding by herself in Hyde Park. She wasn't at all sure how much longer she could maintain her cloak of sweet submissiveness.

When she didn't speak, he explained, "Meaning I will take measures to ensure you understand acceptable behavior."

Straightening, heart racing, she pressed, "And *what* measures would these be?"

"Corrective measures, educational methods."

She didn't like the sound of that or the confident look in his eyes. "Such as?"

"Do you really want to discuss such possible unpleasanties?" He cocked an eyebrow.

Her hands were sweating and, no, she didn't want to talk about this anymore. Yet she said grimly, "I repeat, such as?"

"A man is in charge of his household, his wife and children in particular," he hesitated and went on impatiently, "If need be, to correct misbehavior, I will have no problem baring your bottom and soundly applying my hand." When she remained silent, he continued, "If the situation is serious enough, I will use a strop or a paddle."

Everything inside her quivered. *Bare her bottom. Discipline her.* She should stride past him out of the room, not even bother to give him another refusal to consider his ridiculous notion. But she didn't move.

He walked closer. "I can't imagine ever needing to punish you, little one. From everything I've heard, you're extremely well mannered, civil with everyone. You would make me a good wife."

She glanced at his large hands and her buttocks clenched. Then, almost immediately, she imagined those hands caressing her body, sliding between her legs. His long fingers easing inside her...

She was definitely burning those books tomorrow! Her cheeks flamed again and she quietly groaned at her wicked thoughts.

He reached out to cup the side of her face and she gasped. His eyes had darkened to, almost, a warm blue and she felt the touch of his hand all the way to her tingling toes.

"I'm beginning to think you're not as innocent as you've led people to believe." He thumbed her lips. "You might not be experienced in the ways between a man and a woman, but..."

She bit his thumb and scooted backward, mortified at what she'd done. But she hadn't wanted the sensations tearing through her at his simple touch. And yet, she did want them.

Instead of looking angry, as she expected, he laughed. "Not quite as timid and biddable as you appear." He laughed again. "This marriage might be more interesting than I expected."

"And *what* marriage is that you speak of, Lord Saliston?" her father asked, striding into the wide doorway with Braden at his side.