

His Lady Ashlynn

By

Starla Kaye

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Chapter 1

1817, April

London

Lady Ashlynn Remington had been bored of late, which meant trouble. Trouble for her too indulgent father, annoyance for her too perfect twin sister, Abigail, and amused frustration for Blaine Wellingsworth, her betrothed.

Blaine sat across the formal parlor in his good friend's London town home and watched the young woman who was his betrothed, but didn't wish to be, flit back and forth in front of the big window overlooking the lawn. She had been doing it nearly since they had entered the room. The weather was atrocious for mid-April and he shouldn't have even ventured from his home to come calling this morning. But he hadn't seen her in over a week, having had to take care of estate business on one of his northern properties. He'd had to see her, poor weather or not.

"I wish you would sit down, my lady," he finally said, his patience stretched to its fullest. "You are going to wear a path in the rug and a hole in your slippers if you continue much longer."

Beside him, Braden, her older brother chuckled, earning a glower from his half-sister. "Doubt she would find sitting too comfortable just yet," he teased.

Ashlynn's deceptively angelic face turned red in mortification. Her grass green eyes narrowed and she refused to look in Blaine's direction. "I am quite sure what you are referring to is private business. Business I do not think you should be discussing."

"What did you do this time?" Blaine asked pointedly. His intended bride had earned some sort of punishment from her father, the Duke of Claymore, who Blaine knew had been staying here the last week and left at dawn this morning. It took a lot for the distinguished duke to discipline his three daughters, especially Ashlynn's twin, Abigail, and the youngest, Catherine. However, Ashlynn had a penchant—a big one—for misbehaving or finding trouble to get into.

She shot him a frown before turning to face the dreary, rainy day outside. "Nothing of import. A misunderstanding, really."

"Ashlynn," Blaine prodded. She knew his opinion of the importance of proper behavior, and how he would deal with *improper* behavior on her part. His position in Parliament and his reputation as a peer of the realm meant he and those close to him were constantly watched. "Sit down and explain yourself."

"I would rather not, thank you very much." She remained where she was, not even looking his way.

Braden, who enjoyed tormenting his most beloved—and most taxing—sister said casually, “You probably *should* know about this latest mischief ‘sweet’ Ashlynn got into. All I will say further on the matter is a well-worn strop was involved. And there was quite a bit of vocalization on the part of my dear sister. Quite distressing, actually, to overhear.”

With that he stood and walked toward the doorway. He glanced back, looking from Blaine to Ashlynn, now scowling murderously at him. “I will just close this door and give you some privacy.”

Even though they were engaged it was quite improper for them to be alone together, but Blaine didn’t mind. He waited until the double doors were shut before pinning his annoyed fiancée with a firm look. “Sit. Now.”

For a few seconds she stubbornly refused to obey. Her hands fisted at the sides of her pale green day gown. Then, with a huff of resignation, she marched over toward the settee opposite him. She hesitated, sucked in a breath, and carefully sat down. Her delicate nose pinched in momentary distress.

“Satisfied, your loftiness?” Recently chastised or not, she hadn’t lost her sassiness.

Blaine struggled between irritation and adoration. She was unlike any woman with whom he had ever been involved. Nothing at all like his first wife, the epitome of subservience and quite boring, in truth. And nothing like his second wife, slightly older than he and slightly stuffier than he, whom he had married briefly for convenience sake after his first wife had died. No, Ashlynn, with her lively spirit, her youthful love of adventure, and her distaste for the stringent rules of the *ton’s* idea of decorum was quite unlike most women. And he loved her to the depths of his heart, had almost from the moment they’d been introduced.

“Not quite. I would have you tell me what you did to earn your father’s wrath.” He watched her fidget, her clasped hands in her lap. “You will also tell me what punishment was given.”

She thinned her lips and then snapped, “‘Tis really none of your business.”

He settled back into his chair, crossed his stretched-out legs at the ankles, and called upon his patience. “We will sit here until you explain exactly what I have asked of you.”

“It is most unkind of you to make me talk about such an embarrassing matter.” She shifted a bit, wincing. “Unkind as well to force me to sit when you know, by my brother’s rude statement, that sitting causes me distress.”

He shrugged. “Nevertheless, my dear, you *will* tell me what happened.”

Ashlynn fought the urge to shoot to her feet and rub her still tender bottom. Her father had been most thorough late last evening in his disciplining. She’d slept the night on her stomach and considered not coming out of her room at all this day. But Blaine had

arrived in spite of the heavy rainstorm and a foolish part of her had wanted to see him, the man she didn't want to marry and yet was attracted to. Except that after their first glance at one another, she'd felt awkward facing him. She well knew what he thought of her occasional acts of misbehavior. He would hear soon enough from the gossips within the *ton* what she'd said and done. She very much regretted letting her tongue run so loosely at the ball last night.

"Ashlynn," he again prodded.

Sighing, she gave in. He could be most persistent about matters, more stubborn than even she. She tried to ignore the discomfort of her still-marked, still quite sore bottom beneath the layers of day gown, shift, and pantalets.

"Lady Pendergast can be a real ..." She caught herself before she let slip a word he very much wouldn't have appreciated. At his frown, she bluntly continued, "She made some very crude comments about my father to a couple of old biddies." She noted how Blaine's brows drew together, how his jaw tightened. "I had to—"

"She actually said these things to you?" he interrupted, looking disbelieving.

Ashlynn shook her head and focused on her hands. "Not exactly. But I ..." Again she stopped herself before she said something she would regret and looked up at him.

He stiffened in his chair. "You said something disrespectful, didn't you?"

His tone rubbed her wrong and her temper came out. "She was talking about my father!" She glowered at him.

"Exactly *what* did you say in retaliation?"

She squirmed at his steady gaze, at his awareness that she often said or did something unwise on the spur of the moment. She wasn't a think-about-and-react-later person like her twin. She wasn't a I'll-let-someone-else-deal-with-the-unpleasantness person like her younger sister either. Hence, she got into much more trouble than her sisters.

"I didn't actually *say* anything." Hindsight—okay, well-thrashed hind end—said she should have kept her tongue and her hands under control and simply walked away. No one had really overheard the three ladies except her. But she'd had a frustrating night and she'd been depressed about missing Blaine when she should have been pleased he wasn't there.

Those chocolate brown eyes that could turn so warm and tempting when he stole a kiss, sparked with annoyance. "What did you *do* then?"

Again, she shifted on her tender bottom and avoided his direct gaze. "Well...I was carrying this cup of punch, you see...."

His eyebrows shot up. "You didn't."

"Actually, I did." She raised her chin and met his eyes. "One second I was listening to their horrible comments. The next I was tossing the red punch at Lady

Pendergast.” She almost didn’t admit the rest of it, but knew he would hear about it later. “A servant was passing by with a tray of cups filled with punch. And I...well, I...Let’s just say I had a moment of madness. All three women were wearing red-splashed gowns and screaming at me.”

“Good God!” Blaine gasped, blinking in shock before his eyes narrowed in displeasure. “No wonder your father was upset with you.”

Her face flamed. The memory of her father striding across the ballroom, along with her two older brothers, was not a pleasant one. Braden had stayed behind long enough to find Abigail and bring her back to Braden’s town home. But her father and Daniel had each taken an arm and marched her straight out of the Earl of Timberton’s house. Every disapproving eye in the ballroom had followed her disgraceful exit.

“*Upset* would be putting it mildly, truthfully.” She really didn’t want to tell him more of what happened after that, but she knew he wouldn’t let the subject drop. Still, she waited for him to push the issue.

“Look at me, Ashlynn,” Blaine stated quietly.

She gathered her nerves and faced him. “Must I?”

He nodded. “We are soon to be married. How you behave in public is important to me, personally, and in respect of my position in society. It is important to us, as a couple who respects one another, and to you. Your being an American—even as wrong as it is—is merely tolerated by my peers because I demand it.”

She felt uneasy, unqualified to be his wife, not that she *wanted to be his wife*. She rebelled at rules whenever they meant she couldn’t do what she wanted. She didn’t like the confines of what was expected of the peers and those attached to the peers. And she knew he had stood up for her far too often since becoming involved with her. An involvement that was not of *her* choosing.

“Mayhap you would be better off marrying Abigail. She would—”

Blaine was on his feet and striding over before she could finish the thought. He pulled her to her feet and forced her to meet his furious gaze. “It is *you* I fell in love with. *You* I will marry next month. We will not discuss such nonsense ever again. Do you understand me?”

Her heart raced. She inhaled his scent and ached to be far closer to him than propriety would allow. The strength of his words, of his emotion, wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She did not want the love of this powerful, far too handsome man... and yet she was weak to resist him.

Her arms went around his waist and she snuggled improperly close. She felt the rigid length of his erection pressed against her even through the layers of their clothing. Her cheeks heated as she recalled the many nights she had lain awake dreaming of being in bed with a man. She’d read forbidden, titillating books on the subject of sex. She’d

studied pictures. Lately, even though she tried to fight it, her dreams were of this proud duke.

Blaine kissed the top of her head where it rested at his shoulder level. Then with a shuddery breath, he eased her away from him. "Much more of this and I won't be able to control myself."

"Would that be so horrible?" she asked, still caught up in this strange yearning for more. Her woman's place quivered as it so often did when she was near him. Wetness started between her legs.

His eyes were dark when he looked at her. "You will not be my mistress, Lady Ashlynn. You will be my wife. There will be no improper relations between the two of us until we are wed."

Although she understood his attitude, she couldn't help feeling disgruntled. Desire was a fierce opponent at times, even if she didn't wish to desire him. In her irritation with him and her confused feelings, she spoke without thinking. "You have seen my bare bottom on more than one occasion, and that is certainly *improper*."

Good heavens! What had she done? Reminding him of those few times when he had taken her in hand for misbehavior, when he shouldn't have even touched her. This strong-willed duke hadn't had any qualms about leading her out of a ballroom, twice, and once at a garden party to somewhere private. She'd been too shocked and embarrassed to resist him each time. And each time her poor bottom had suffered considerably.

He stepped farther away, raising one eyebrow. "I am surprised you would bring such a matter up, Lady Ashlynn. But, yes, improper or not, I have indeed seen your lovely bottom bare and over my knee."

Her face heated yet again and she inwardly cursed her stupidity and loose tongue. She started to move back toward the window.

"Since you have brought up the matter of your bare bottom..." When she glanced back at him in irritation, he motioned her to the settee once more. "Sit. You have not yet explained exactly how your father dealt with your recent act of misbehavior. I would know it. Now."

"Don't you have more important business to attend to today? A meeting of Parliament? Perhaps a meeting with your lawyer?" She did not want to continue this unpleasant discussion, nor did she wish to sit.

He returned to his chair, stretched out his long legs again, and said firmly, "Sit down, Lady Ashlynn Remington. Now."

Ashlynn heaved a put-upon sigh and gingerly sat down. Her clothing once again irritated her sore bottom. "None of this is proper, Your Grace. Nothing we have discussed so far and not of which you have asked me to discuss."

"Yet we *will* continue the discussion." His demeanor showed that in this instance he went against such a consideration. "The details, I wish to hear them."

She straightened her spine, held her hands tightly together in her lap. “Have I mentioned how insufferable I find you? How much I do not wish to become your wife?” A life with this man would be impossible. He would never fully understand her, never give her the freedom she’d had back in her home in Virginia. Gerald would never think of trying to control her actions, never consider turning her over his lap. “My father should never have agreed to this ridiculous match. My heart already belongs to—”

Anger pinched his brow. “I will not hear again of this supposed young man you loved in the colonies! You will learn to love me.” It came out as a command, and yet she heard a hint of vulnerability that surprised her.

Pulse pounding, she dared to protest. “My feelings for another mean nothing to you? You would take to wife a woman who desires someone else?”

He studied her for several seconds, then calmed a bit and countered, “But you desire *me* as well. Mayhap more than this Gerald Smythe, I believe.” He relaxed again, smiling knowingly. “It is in your eyes when you watch me and are unaware I am observing.”

She snorted. “You are a sinfully handsome man, Your Grace. Any woman would find you desirable.” She tipped her chin up. “Even if I might find you admirable in a physical way, that does not mean I want to lay with you, be your wife.” *Lie, lie, lie!* While she had no desire to marry him, she *did* too often think about lying beside him in bed.

That mocking eyebrow of his rose once more. “I will not tolerate lying in the future, either. This time I will let it go.” While she sucked in a frustrated breath, he captured her gaze again. “Back to what we were discussing.”

More than annoyed with the subject and with spending time with him now, she hissed, “He stropped me. Are you satisfied now?” She started to get up, hesitated at his head shaking.

“I would have the details. You deserved to pay memorably for your misbehavior so that you would not dare to act in such a disgraceful manner again.” A vein pulsed in his neck. “If I am not satisfied that you were adequately punished, I will finish it myself.”

Her eyes widened and her breath caught as she looked warily at him. Improper or not, this stubborn man would do exactly as he’d said, she already knew that much about him. She refused to look directly at him as she gritted out, “You may trust that I *have been* adequately punished.”

“I will be the judge of that.”

She wanted to get up and storm out of the sitting room. But he would come after her and then... With a resigned decision, she began her grim explanation. “The moment we returned here Father sent me up to my bedchamber while he went to fetch...” she hesitated, grimacing, “the awful razor strop.”

She hazarded a glance at Blaine and found him patiently watching her, waiting. Irritated, she continued. "I disrobed down to my pantalets, as is normal when he punishes me. Then, also as typical, I was made to bend over the end of the bed. I am sure you can picture the rest of it."

"Your pert bottom was thrust out, high and in good position, I imagine."

When she noted the huskiness in his tone, she gazed at him. His brown eyes had darkened; his breaths were deeper. Oddly she found herself intrigued by his reaction and nodded.

"I assume he parted the back of your pantalets. Spread them apart until your bare buttocks were revealed."

Ashlynn's heart raced at the way his voice lowered, at the way he looked at her. They were talking about her being punished and yet both of them seemed to be aroused by it. She should be appalled. But she found herself almost whispering, "Yes, Father bared my bottom."

Blaine drew in another deep breath and then he attempted to shake out of his obvious state of arousal. He pressed in a firmer voice, "Explain the rest."

She didn't want to, but she couldn't stop the words as they spilled from her mouth. She saw herself in her room, as if observing someone else. "My forearms were on the mattress, my head lowered in submission. I felt a chill from the open window as a breeze swept over my bared bottom. My stomach knotted and I waited anxiously for the lecture...for him to begin the stropping."

"Does he always lecture you? Or does he sometimes simply punish you, knowing you already know why it is being done?"

"There is always a lecture of some kind." She dreaded those because they stalled getting to the actual punishment, which she wanted done quickly.

"I am not sure I will follow that tradition," Blaine interrupted her thoughts. "If I believe you understand why I am punishing you, then we will get straight to that part."

How did she feel about his statement? Good? Puzzled? She shook off the idea. "Do you wish to hear the rest?" She hoped he'd already heard enough.

He nodded and she glanced away, her mind returning to what had happened. "After the rehashing of what I had done wrong, Father held the cold leather strop against my bottom. I tensed, held my breath for that first horrible lash." She trembled, remembering exactly how it had felt. "It came down hard, as the first one always does. I tried not to, but I screamed out."

As he'd done before, Blaine took up the telling. "He applied the strop repeatedly, firmly over and over. You tried to squirm away from the lashes, probably wiggled your sweet ass all over the place. The strikes stung fiercely. I imagine you couldn't keep from crying out. And you danced on your toes, did you not? Maybe even arched backward and moaned in misery."

Once more his tone had turned husky and she met his impassioned gaze. Instead of stopping this revelation like she should, she held his attention and quivered with a strange desire. Not for being punished harshly by this man, but for sharing such an intimate act with him. “No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t remain in position. He was so upset with me and was determined that I would not behave in such a manner again. He wanted to make sure I remembered the lesson.”

She shifted uncomfortably on the chair, still feeling the results of that lesson. “Afterward, my throat was raw from crying out. Tears streamed down my face when I was finally allowed to stand once more.” She wanted to reach back and touch her still tender bottom but resisted. “My backside was on fire. He did not leave an inch untouched. Then he gave me a disappointed look and left the room with his awful strop.”

“You slept on your stomach, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

He studied her for a couple of minutes and she wondered why she had given him the explanation he’d requested. Even more, she wondered what he was thinking now. How could he possibly want a marriage with a woman whom he knew was frequently disciplined? Why wouldn’t he want a more biddable woman like Abigail for his wife? As much as she detested being punished, she knew her nature would never change. She would always struggle to follow society’s rules, resist obeying any man she married. Except Gerald, but then she was much stronger willed than him. He was nothing like this man.

“Thank you for telling me.” Blaine sat up straighter and held out a hand to her. “Come here.”

Nerves fluttered in her stomach. *Go to him?* Uncertainty had her hesitating, but then she rose uneasily to her feet and made her way over to him. Curious.

He looked up at her and varying emotions seemed to tumble around in his eyes but the one that touched her most was the desire firing there. This man who could no doubt have almost any woman in England wanted *her*.

“May I cup your buttocks now?” he asked in a thickened voice.

“I...I...” She should refuse to allow such a brazen act. Instead she stepped between his spread legs and waited breathlessly.

His arms moved around her and his large hands covered her quivering bottom. Even through the layers of clothing she felt his touch. “This is indecent, Your Grace,” she offered quietly, but didn’t move away.

He held her in place. “Quite indecent.” He grinned crookedly up at her. “Yet you do not resist me.”

What could she say? She hadn’t refused his request, had even basically given herself to him.

He squeezed her tender bottom just a bit, enough to have her draw in a breath of surprise and discomfort. “While I do not necessarily enjoy thrashing a woman, I will do so when needed. I do not take pleasure in hearing cries of pain, but I will tune them out if the discipline must be harsh enough for her to cry out.”

Her woman’s place was pulsing and she felt that strange wetness between her legs again. How odd, considering he was talking about delivering a painful punishment.

He drew in a breath, his wide chest shuddering. “I have no qualms about painting a woman’s ass dark red, watching her wriggle and kick up her legs. Demands and pleas for me to stop fall on my deaf ears. I will end the discipline when I believe the woman fully understands why she is being punished.”

No, life with this man would not be easy. She stepped back and he let her. “I do not think I can be that woman.” She shook her head. “I cannot marry you.”

“There will be much more between us than discipline sessions.” Again he looked at her with heated eyes. “I am a passionate man. You are a passionate woman.”

“How do you know that?” she asked warily. She had no doubt in her mind that Blaine was passionate, but how could he think that of her? They had only shared a couple of kisses.

That cocky grin appeared once more. “Everything you do is done with passion. You react with fervor to anything you oppose. Including the idea of marrying me.” He held her gaze. “But you *will* do so in exactly one month from today.”

With that, he stood and headed toward the closed door. “We will attend Lord Amhurst’s ball tomorrow night. I will call for you at precisely seven o’clock.”

Ashlynn finally came out of the bizarre daze she’d apparently been in and countered, “No.”

He didn’t even glance back at her before he opened the door and left the room. Evidently her refusal mattered not to him. But she wasn’t going anywhere ever again with him. She absolutely was not!