

THE PASSION

EXCERPT

She had never again expected to see the bold American who had touched her life so fleetingly. Thus it was with a heavy heart that Aurora returned to the fortress prison. She felt a hollowness in the pit of her stomach as she entered the dim cell.

Nicholas Sabine stood with his back to her, a shaft of sunlight gilding his fair hair. He was fully clothed this time, she noted absently. Someone had provided him with a coat and a pair of Hessian boots, so that he more closely resembled a gentleman of means than a savage pirate or a condemned prisoner.

When he turned slowly to face her, however, he still had the same powerful effect on her; she felt her heart quicken in her chest as she met the dark intensity of his gaze.

"Thank you for coming," he said in a quiet voice.

He studied her for a long moment. Aurora withstood his piercing assessment with uncertainty, wondering what he intended to say. When he didn't speak, her gaze went to the bandage at his temple. It seemed clean and a bit smaller than yesterday, as if it had been freshly changed. She was about to inquire how his head wound was faring when he spoke.

"What has your cousin told you?" Sabine asked.

"Only that you need my help for your sister."

"I do." He eyed her speculatively another moment, then turned to pace about the small cell like a caged cat -- lithe, graceful, on edge. "You may call me mad, but I ask you to hear me out fully before you decide."

His sense of urgency communicated itself to her, making her uneasy. "Very well, Mr. Sabine," Aurora prodded. "I am listening."

Pausing, he turned to face her again, this time studying her from beneath his thick lashes. "I would like to make you a formal offer of marriage."

Aurora simply stared, not comprehending. After the space of a dozen heartbeats, she realized she had indeed heard him correctly. She drew an uneven breath. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly serious." His beautiful mouth twisted without amusement. "I assure you, I do not take the prospect of matrimony lightly. I have never before proposed marriage to a woman -- and would not be doing so now, if the circumstances were not so dire."

Aurora remained mute, her mind racing with shock, bewilderment, as she tried to form a reply. "I cannot simply agree to marry you, Mr. Sabine," she managed at last. "There are practicalities I must consider."

"Such as?"

Such as the fact that Nicholas Sabine was not the kind of man she would ever willingly choose as her husband. She had never met so compelling a man, or one who had made such a forceful

impact on her. There was a sense of danger about him, an intensity that was intimidating, if not frightening... although his ferocity now might be driven by his desperate situation. "If I were seeking a husband, a pirate -- an American one -- would not be my first choice. By your own admission, you are a violent man."

He raised his hand to his head wound, a wound he'd received in a fierce brawl with the British Navy. "I understand why you would be reluctant to accept my proposal. I'm not at all the sort a lady like you should be associating with." He laughed softly to himself. "Indeed, if you were my sister, I would not allow you within a mile of me. But while my own past is not entirely spotless, I have never been guilty of murder. And I've never shown violence toward any woman. I promise you solemnly, you have nothing to fear from me."

No, Aurora reflected. Nothing to fear but what he made her feel. His mere nearness made her pulse race, made her skin warm and her body feel flushed with awareness.

"And keep in mind," he pressed, "the short duration of our union. I'm about to be hanged. Even if I were the kind of man you claim, you wouldn't have to suffer my company for long. A day or two at most. I certainly can refrain from acting the savage pirate for the brief term of our marriage."

Aurora felt an ache in the vicinity of her heart. She couldn't believe this man would soon die. He radiated vitality and vibrant life...

"What you are proposing... sounds so cold-blooded," she said finally, grasping at straws.

He shook his head. "Think of it as a business arrangement. Ladies of your class commonly enter into such agreements."

It was not common for ladies to marry, only to lose their husbands the next day, Aurora thought in dismay. "So you wish this to be a simple business arrangement?"

"Not precisely." She heard him draw a slow breath. "I should make my meaning clear, Lady Aurora. Our marriage would not be in name only. To be legitimate, it must be fully consummated."

Her gaze locked with his, searching. His fathomless eyes were steadfast, unwavering in their intensity.

"I want no question of the legality of our union," he said levelly, "or the possibility that it could be set aside."

Excerpt from The Passion by Nicole Jordan
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