

WICKED FANTASY

EXCERPT

London, April 1811

Her first sight of the wicked, dashing adventurer, Trey Deverill, startled Antonia Maitland immensely, for he was unmistakably, breathtakingly nude.

Seeing his unclothed body was purely accidental, of course.

Glad to be home from her select boarding academy for a spring holiday, Antonia handed her bonnet and gloves over to the waiting butler and turned toward the Map Room, where her father oversaw his vast shipping empire. She was eager to see him for the first time in over a month.

"I believe you will find Mr. Maitland upstairs, Miss Maitland," the butler intoned. "Possibly in the gallery."

"Thank you," she replied, knowing her father must be communing with the portrait of his beloved late wife.

Antonia ran up the wide, sweeping staircase and hurried along the elegant east wing of the mansion. Eight years ago, shortly before her mother's unexpected death of a lung fever, Samuel Maitland had spared no expense to build the grand residence in a newly fashionable district of London just south of Mayfair. But his favorite room was the portrait gallery, where he kept his wife's memory alive.

Antonia's current favorite room was the luxurious, newfangled bathing chamber, located at the far end of the corridor. When she saw a footman exit the room and disappear around the corner, she almost sighed in anticipation at the thought of a hot bath. Upon reaching the corridor's end, she saw that the door had been left partway open. But when absently she glanced inside, she stopped short.

A man had just stepped from the large oval copper tub.

A sleekly muscular, powerfully built man.

A shockingly nude man.

She could see the side of his tall form—his bronzed back and taut buttocks, his lean hips and long sinewed legs, all streaming with water. Suddenly breathless, she stood riveted at the sight of his body: hard-muscled, vital, beautiful, except for the disfiguring scars on his torso....

As if sensing her presence, he lifted his head alertly and swung toward her, giving her a fuller view of his loins.

"Oh, my..." Antonia murmured, startled and fascinated at the same time.

Swiftly she jerked her eyes away from that forbidden masculine territory, only to have her gaze roam helplessly back up his body. In all of her nearly seventeen years she had never seen

anything so stunning as this man. Or magnificent. Nor had she experienced such a purely, primal feminine reaction.

Heat flooded over her skin, and she felt a sudden, shocking warmth between her thighs.

When she managed to drag her gaze higher, she realized that his face was as sinfully handsome as the rest of him. But it was more his striking, sea green eyes beneath slashing brows that gave him such a bold and wicked appeal.

When those clear green eyes locked with hers, Antonia felt fresh heat sear along all her nerve-endings.

He reached for a towel to cover himself and draped the linen around his lean hips. "I beg your pardon."

Realizing she had been staring witlessly, she blushed to the roots of her dark red hair and stammered a reply. "No— It was entirely my fault— I should not be here...."

"Miss Maitland, I presume?"

"Yes.... Who are you?"

At her bluntness, a crooked smile flashed across his mouth. "Trey Deverill," he replied to her question, watching her expression for a reaction.

She gave him one; her eyebrows shot up as she recognized the name. She'd heard tales of the notorious Trey Deverill over the years—from various shipping merchants and sea captains, and from her father as well. Deverill was an adventurer and explorer, renowned in particular for battling pirates on the high seas.

She had often imagined what he was like, but given his celebrated reputation, he was younger than she'd expected. And in the flesh, he was far more... *vital* than her fantasies.

Deploring the direction her mind was taking, Antonia cleared her throat to compose herself and spoke, hoping to sound more mature than a green schoolgirl. "Forgive me for my rudeness, Mr. Deverill. It was merely a shock to find you... like this. I am not normally so easily flustered."

"Understandable under the circumstances," he observed, amusement glinting in his remarkable eyes.

He, on the other hand, seemed not the least embarrassed, she noted. Or inhibited. No doubt he was fully aware of the effect he had on females. On her. He stood at his ease, his head cocked to one side, contemplating her.

Or perhaps he was merely waiting politely for her to cease gawking and leave.

"Would you oblige me by shutting the door?" he finally said.

"Yes... certainly." Coming to her senses at last, Antonia reached forward for the door handle.

"Oh, and Miss Maitland?"

She tensed, wondering what he meant to say. "Yes?"

"I don't think we should mention this unfortunate encounter to your father. He would skin me alive for compromising you."

Her blush only heightened, if that was possible. "Believe me, sir, I have no intention of mentioning this to *anyone*, most especially my father."

Firmly shutting the door, Antonia hurried away to resume her interrupted search for her father, determined to try to forget the decidedly scandalous encounter with the exciting adventurer.

Yet as she fled, Antonia knew without a doubt that the wicked, breathtaking image of Trey Deverill's body would be indelibly etched in her memory forever.

London, June 1815

With a start, Antonia awakened from a dream, her skin burning, her body shivering with longing. In the dim light of early morning, she lay in bed, tangled in her sheets, aching for the elusive fulfillment that had once again drifted just out of reach.

Giving a sigh of frustration, Antonia rolled onto her back to stare up at the canopy overhead. The dream always ended the same way—with a disappointing emptiness that left her aching and unfulfilled.

As a girl she'd had lovely dreams of a dashing pirate who carried her off on a glorious adventure. Then she'd met Deverill and tasted his stunning kiss. From that point on, he had become the sole focus of her dreams. For four years now she'd imagined him making love to her, sweeping her to a world of dark desire and searing pleasure.

Yet she was only tormenting herself by dwelling on him this way. And now that Deverill had returned to London in the flesh, it was imperative that she quell her wanton imaginings, or she would never be able to again look him in the eye.

With another sigh, this one of self-disgust, Antonia threw off the covers and rose to dress for her usual morning ride.

She was still feeling restless and out of sorts by the time she left the house, although the bright, sunny summer morning raised her spirits a little as she descended the front steps of the elegant mansion. Her horse and groom awaited her in the drive, but her thoughts were distracted enough that she noticed nothing else until she came face-to-face with the very object of her wicked fantasies.

Antonia halted abruptly, her eyes widening. With complete nonchalance, Trey Deverill leaned against the stone-and-ironwork livery post, watching her, his arms folded over his broad chest, one highly polished boot crossed over the other. He was dressed for riding in a tailored, bottle green coat that reflected the green in his eyes, and he wore a tall beaver hat over his thick, unruly hair, which seemed to tame his rakish good looks the slightest degree.

For a moment, Antonia simply stared at his strong, rugged features. It was disconcerting to find him on her doorstep, and even more disconcerting to remember how thoroughly he had occupied her thoughts only a short time ago. Could he tell that she'd been entertaining erotic

visions of him all morning long? That vivid dreams of him had haunted her sleep last night and so many other nights?

Closing the final distance between them, she forced herself to offer him a calm greeting. "Were you waiting for me, Mr. Deverill?"

"No, I thought I would call on the milkmaid," he replied, a lazy, amused charm in his sea green eyes. "Of course I was waiting for you, sweeting."

Beyond him, Antonia saw, her groom stood holding the bridles of her skittish bay mare along with his own hack, while a strapping chestnut stood patiently nearby, chewing the bit—evidently Deverill's mount, she deduced.

"How did you know to expect me? I suppose Mrs. Peeke told you I usually enjoy a daily ride in the park?"

Deverill shrugged. "It wasn't difficult to determine your routine." He glanced at her solitary groom. "Your betrothed isn't accompanying you, I see."

"He doesn't care to rise so early," Antonia answered truthfully. "Nor is he as fond of riding as I am."

"Good. I prefer to enjoy your company uninterrupted."

Antonia arched an eyebrow. "I don't recall inviting you, Mr. Deverill."

His smile was innocent and devilish at the same time. "You didn't. But I have a business matter to discuss with you that wasn't appropriate to introduce at the ball last night."

Antonia didn't know whether to believe him, but she made no further protest. A morning ride in Hyde Park with Deverill, chaperoned by her groom, was unexceptional, and since he wasn't the kind of man to give up, she suspected she would do better to give in gracefully now and get any conversation over with.

She hadn't counted on Deverill touching her, though. When she went to mount, he ignored her groom and took hold of her waist. Antonia drew a sharp breath, her spine tensing as her body eagerly responded to the memory his touch evoked. For a moment their eyes locked, and she felt certain Deverill understood exactly how he affected her. Then, with an ease that betrayed immense physical strength, he lifted her onto her sidesaddle.

Excerpt from Wicked Fantasy by Nicole Jordan

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