

The Art of Sinning (The Sinful Suitors)

By Sabrina Jeffries

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The first novel in the Sinful Suitors series by *New York Times* bestselling author Sabrina Jeffries! At St. George's Club, guardians conspire to keep their unattached sisters and wards out of the clutches of sinful suitors. Which works fine…except when the sinful suitors are members!

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No stranger to scandal, Yvette agrees to be Keane's subject—in exchange for his help gaining entry to the city's brothels he knows intimately, so she can track a missing woman and solve a family mystery. But when their practical partnership leads to lessons in the art of sinning, can they find a bold and lasting love?

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Editorial Review

Review
"With every book, Jeffries grows into an even more accomplished writer whose memorable characters and unforgettable stories speak to readers on many levels." (--*RT Book Reviews (4 1/2 Star Top Pick)*)

About the Author
Sabrina Jeffries is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of several Regency-set historical romance series, including the Royal Brotherhood, the School for Heiresses, the Hellions of Halstead Hall, the Duke's Men, and the Sinful Suitors. When she's not writing in a coffee-fueled haze, she's traveling with her husband, caring for her adult autistic son, or indulging in one of her passions: jigsaw puzzles, chocolate, music, and costume parties. With more than nine million books in print in twenty languages, the North Carolina author never regrets tossing a budding career in academics for the sheer joy of writing fun fiction and hopes that one day a book of hers will end up saving the world. She always dreams big.

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The Art of Sinning

One

London, England

Late August 1829

London's loftiest lords and ladies packed the ballroom in the duke's mansion for the wedding breakfast of Dominick Manton and his new bride, Jane. But despite the number of pretty women among them, Jeremy Keane, American artist and rumored rakehell, wanted only to flee.

He shouldn't have attended. He should have stayed upstairs in his guest bedchamber doing preliminary sketches for his painting, even though inspiration eluded him and he still hadn't found the right model. Anything would be better than enduring this paean to domestic bliss.

Thunderation. He hadn't expected it to unsettle him so. Seeing a bride and groom smile adoringly at each other shouldn't continue to bring back the past, to plague him with the guilt of knowing—

Muttering a curse, he snatched a glass off a tray held by a passing footman and downed champagne, wishing for something stronger. He couldn't take much more of this.

With purposeful steps, he headed across the ballroom toward the entrance. He had to escape before he said or did something he regretted.

Then the woman of his imagination entered, and he stopped breathing. She was magnificent. She wore a dress of emerald silk that shimmered in a shaft of sunlight as if the heavens had opened to show her to him.

He couldn't believe it. She was exactly the model he required for his latest work.

As he watched, the brunette glanced about her. Tall and luxuriously figured, she towered over the delicate

Englishwomen simpering their way through the crowd. With her strong features, jewel-green eyes, and generous mouth, she was the very image of the Juno in Gavin Hamilton's Juno and Jupiter. She even carried herself like that majestic Roman goddess.

She was absolutely perfect. It was not only in her looks, but her stance, at once self-effacing and imbued with drama. It was in the wariness lurking in her eyes.

He must have her. After months of looking for the right model, he deserved to have her.

That was, assuming she would agree to his proposition. She looked old enough to be her own woman, but he couldn't tell from the cut of her ball gown if she was unattached, widowed, or married. He hoped it was one of the latter two. Because if she were a rank innocent, he'd have a devil of a time convincing her family to allow her to sit for him.

He started toward her.

"Jeremy!" cried a female voice behind him. "There you are!"

He turned to find Zoe, his distant cousin as well as the pregnant sister-in-law of the groom, waddling toward him. Damn. He was trapped. Worse yet, when he glanced back for his goddess in green, she'd vanished. Of all the blasted bad luck. In a mansion like the Duke of Lyons's, there was no telling where she'd gone.

Stifling a curse, he faced Zoe. "Good evening, coz. Nice to see you again."

After bussing him on each cheek, she pulled back to glare at him. "I haven't laid eyes on you in three months and that's the insipid welcome you give me?"

"I'm still tired from the trip," he lied. "I just arrived from Calais yesterday evening, you know."

"I'm so sorry you and your apprentice had to stay with Max and Lisette last night, instead of at our house. But what with the wedding—"

"You had too many other guests to juggle. I know. And there was more room here, anyway."

That seemed to relieve her. "Thank you for understanding. But everyone is leaving this afternoon, so I do hope you're coming back to the town house with us as planned."

"If I can hold out until you're ready to leave," he said dryly.

She flashed him a veiled glance. "I'm sure wedding celebrations aren't your favorite."

His heart dropped into his stomach. Was she referring to Hannah? He hadn't thought any of Zoe's family knew about that part of his life. "What makes you say that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Well, I assume any bachelor would find weddings dull, but especially you." She laughed gaily.

No. She didn't know about Hannah.

Relief flooding him, he forced a sardonic smile. "Weddings are more exhausting than dull. Between fleecing

all the lords in the card room and comforting all the disappointed young lovelies who missed out on snagging the groom, I'm fairly worn out."

"Comforting? Is that what they're calling it now?" She shook her head. "I see that your travels haven't changed you one whit. You're as incorrigible as ever."

"You know me." He somehow managed a light tone. "What's the fun in being corrigible?"

Thank God she hadn't guessed at the truth: that he hated weddings because they reminded him of his own over a decade ago. Which had been followed six months later by a funeral with two coffins—one for his wife and one for his stillborn son.

Regret and anger roiled in his gut. Damn it, he'd suppressed the image of those coffins for a while now. Must it rise again every time he attended some fool's wedding?

Fortunately, Zoe didn't seem to notice his consternation. "Anyway," she said breezily, "I thought I should tell you that your sister and your mother are on their way to London."

God help him. That was the last thing he needed. "I suppose they think to fetch me back home to Montague."

Situated on the banks of the Brandywine River a few hours from Philadelphia, his family homestead held the largest of the textile mills that were the source of his family's fortune. And now that his late, unlamented father was dead, his sister Amanda was running them all, since she possessed a half interest in the properties. He held the other half, although he'd toss it into the sea before he'd set foot on Montague land again.

The better choice, of course, was to sell Amanda his half. She wanted it, and he wanted to give it to her. But since the properties had all come from his mother's family, Father's will demanded that Mother agree to the sale. And so far she had refused, confound her.

She ought to know better than to think he would return to run the mills. He loved his mother and sister dearly, but Father's death hadn't changed a damned thing about his feelings for Montague. He would rather cut his own throat than carry on Father's legacy. And the sooner Mother realized it, the better off everyone would be.

"When do they leave for England?" Jeremy asked. How much time did he have to prepare?

"When did they leave for England, you mean. They should arrive within a few weeks." She ducked her gaze. "No doubt they departed as soon as they got my letter."

"Your letter?"

Zoe stuck out her chin, though she still wouldn't meet his eyes. "You can't blame me for taking pity on them. You don't keep them informed about where you're headed."

"Because it's none of their concern!" When she flinched, he moderated his tone. "And because I rarely know where I'm going next. I could write and say, 'I'm sailing the Danube with an Austrian prince and his consort,' but by the time they receive the letter, I'm likely to have befriended some monk with an Alpine refuge full of sculptures that I'm off to view."

“Precisely,” she said hotly. “As you’re so fond of saying, you blow with the wind. That makes it hard for them to keep up with you.”

“They don’t need to.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “The point of this trip across the Atlantic was that I got to travel the British Isles and the Continent to see works of art I’d never experienced.” And to make a life for himself well away from home. “They know that.”

“Yes, but Amanda is desperate to speak to you about your father’s estate. So when she wrote asking after you, I told her that you were returning to London to view the British Institution’s annual summer exhibition before it closes at the end of the month. I thought your family might get the letter in time to be here for that, but I gather that the crossings have been rough recently, so my letter and their ship were probably delayed.”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Jeremy muttered a series of oaths under his breath. “You shouldn’t have interfered.”

Zoe laid her hand on his arm. “You’re the closest thing I have to a brother. I hate to see you at odds with your family.”

“I’m not at odds with anyone. But there’s no point in talking to them. They have their minds made up about—” Catching himself before he could reveal too much, he pasted a bland smile to his lips. “It doesn’t matter. What’s done is done. I’ll deal with them.” Somehow.

She cocked her head. “You won’t run off again, will you? You’ll wait for them to arrive?”

“I came for the exhibition, remember?” he said irritably. “I haven’t yet had a chance to view it.”

He thrust aside the possibility that his sister might have an urgent reason for needing him. If it had been so blamed important, she could have included that information in a letter to Zoe. And clearly she hadn’t.

Zoe arched an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t put it past you to flee as soon as my back is turned. You have a bad habit of avoiding your American family.”

It was more a case of avoiding what they wanted of him, though he couldn’t say that. Instead, he donned the role that had become natural around Zoe. “You know me,” he said genially. “Never met a responsibility I couldn’t shirk.”

She looked as if she were about to speak, when someone hailed her from across the room. “Oh, dear, I’m being summoned. I believe we’re starting the wedding toasts.” She hurried off as fast as she could with a babe in her belly.

Wonderful. Now he had to endure a series of sentimental pronouncements about the marital future of the happy couple.

His gut knotted, and he frowned. He refused to sit through that. And it wasn’t as if he could wander the crowd, looking for his Juno during the toasts, anyway. That would draw too much attention.

So he’d just escape until the wedding party was done with their maudlin speeches. Thank God he’d thought to tuck his cigar case into his pocket. Pausing only to snag a lit taper, he fled through some French doors onto the empty terrace.

But not empty for long. Hot on his heels came another man, apparently thinking to escape the toasts as well. Jeremy didn't mind. He hated smoking alone.

The fellow stopped short at the sight of Jeremy and glanced back into the crowded room. Then, with a look of grim purpose, he shut the door behind him and evidently resigned himself to having company.

Jeremy took pity on the chap. "Cigar?"

"God, yes."

Lighting both off the taper, Jeremy offered one to his new companion. He watched as the dark-haired man in perfectly tailored attire puffed on it with what looked like satisfaction.

"These are good," the man said, as if surprised.

"They ought to be. Brought them from America myself." Jeremy drew on his.

The fellow shot him a hard glance. "You're American?"

He nodded. "The name is Keane. I'm a distant cousin of the groom's sister-in-law."

"You're the artist whom the papers criticize so much."

Jeremy grimaced. "Indeed I am."

The man gazed back into the room. "I'm Blakeborough. A . . . er . . . friend of the bride's family. Of sorts."

The bitterness in the man's tone gave Jeremy pause. He'd heard that name somewhere. Ah, yes. Lord Blakeborough. Or more precisely, Edwin Barlow, the Earl of Blakeborough. "Rumor has it that you were jilted by the bride," Jeremy said with a bluntness equal to the earl's.

Blakeborough scowled at him. "Rumor has it that you're an arse."

"Rumor is correct." Jeremy took a puff of his cigar. Might as well live down to his reputation.

The earl hesitated, then smiled. "You can't be all bad if you carry around cigars of this caliber."

"I believe in being prepared for the rare occasion when one must wait out the excruciating boredom of wedding toasts given by people whom one barely knows."

"Or people one knows too well," Blakeborough said morosely.

Jeremy almost felt sorry for the chap.

Almost. The earl was lucky not to have ended up married. Having a wife was a burden when a man was ill equipped to be a husband. "What we really need to salvage the evening is some good brandy."

"Ah! Excellent idea." Blakeborough fished around in his coat pocket. "I brought a flask." As he offered it to Jeremy, he added ruefully, "One must also come prepared for when the wedding of one's former fiancée

becomes interminable."

Jeremy swigged from the flask and handed it back. "I'm surprised you came at all."

"Jane and I were never really romantic. Besides, I wanted her to know there were no hard feelings." His voice held an edge that belied his words.

"And that your pride wasn't damaged in the least."

Blakeborough smiled stiffly. "That played some small part in it, yes."

They smoked a moment in silence, the muted sounds of sonorous voices barely penetrating their refuge. Then a burst of laughter made them both glance through the glass doors.

That's when Jeremy saw her again—his Juno, in the flesh. Thank God.

"Speaking of beautiful women," Jeremy said to Blakeborough, "can you tell me the name of that one there in the emerald silk?"

The fellow looked over and blanched. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to paint her."

The earl glared at him. "That won't ever happen."

"Why not?" Then the man's curt tone registered. "Don't tell me—you've fixed on her as your future countess."

"Hardly. She's my sister."

God rot it, that was worse. Sisters were sacrosanct.

But Jeremy wasn't ready to give up. The earl appreciated good cigars, which showed him to be sensible. Maybe he could be made to see reason. "Since I have a sister myself, I understand. I would strangle any unworthy fellow who went after mine. But my interest in yours is purely professional."

"Forgive my candor, sir, but I've seen your paintings. There's no way in hell I'd let you paint my sister as one of your hopeless lunatics or seedy whores or whatever else you're thinking to make her."

Damn. Admittedly, his work had turned rather bleak of late, but only because he'd come to prefer depicting the raw drama of the real world rather than prettified history or wealthy ladies and gentlemen in fine attire.

And his latest painting would not only be dark but violent. Not that he meant to tell the earl that. "I can always disguise her features, change her hair color—"

"That won't work. In case you haven't noticed, Yvette is rather distinctive in appearance."

Yvette. Even her name was exotic, which made him want her even more. For the painting. That's all. "Exactly. She's arresting, and that makes for a good image."

“Yes, but to change her enough for her identity to be kept secret, you’d have to turn her into another woman entirely. So you might as well go choose another woman.”

“I don’t want another woman. I want her.”

Blakeborough drank some brandy. “Well, you can’t have her. Between her argumentative nature and her ‘arresting’ looks, she’s had enough trouble finding suitors as it is. You paint her in one of your provocative scenes, and she’ll die a spinster for certain.”

Incredulous, Jeremy stared through the window at her. “A spinster! Are all the men in England mad?”

“Yes.” Blakeborough sighed. “Not to mention wary of the scandals that dog our family wherever we go.”

Suddenly Jeremy remembered the other bit of gossip he’d heard. Blakeborough’s brother had been convicted of kidnapping the bride’s cousin. That must be quite a tale. He’d have to get the earl to tell him sometime. After he arranged to have the impressive Yvette model for his latest work.

The first ones he’d exhibited in London—depictions of a lunatic asylum, a butcher shop, a carriage accident, and other “genre paintings,” as some called them—had received mixed reviews. Some critics had lauded his new direction. Others had complained that he no longer created the grand historical paintings for which he’d become known.

But his new work, an allegory, would give to everyday struggles the same weight as great events in history or mythology. It would be his masterpiece. With any luck, it would gain him a place in London’s Royal Academy of Arts.

With any luck, it would also launch him as an artist of equal caliber to Géricault or Delacroix, not just one more painter of the same old historical scenes. But for that, he needed a woman with a striking appearance to play the primary role. A woman like Blakeborough’s sister.

“As it happens, I’m quite a popular fellow in society right now,” Jeremy said. Even if not lauded by his peers to the extent he wanted. “So a fine painting of your sister by me might increase her popularity, too.”

The earl pondered that a moment, then narrowed his gray gaze on Jeremy. “That’s an excellent notion.”

“You see? I wouldn’t robe her in anything outrageous—”

“No, not that. What I mean is, you could paint her portrait, a formal one that shows off her attractions. That would surely help her in society.”

Jeremy cursed under his breath. “I don’t do portraits.”

“Why the devil not?”

“Because the sitters always want false representations. They think they should be depicted as more beautiful or clever or rich than they are. And since I refuse to cater to such hypocrisy, they’re never happy with the results.”

Blakeborough looked him over as if assessing his worth. “What if I paid you handsomely for the painting?”

“Fortunately, I don’t need the money.”

The earl snorted, clearly unfamiliar with that sentiment, especially coming from a lowly American artist. “Well, that’s the only way I’ll allow it. It’s a portrait or nothing, sir.”

Stubborn ass. “I will not paint a formal portrait of Yvette—”

“Lady Yvette,” Blakeborough corrected him.

“And even if I did, I would paint her as she is. I would never agree to a portrait that ‘shows off her attractions,’ whatever that means. Might as well ask me to dress her up like a whore to entice customers.”

“If that would work, I might consider it,” the earl grumbled. When Jeremy lifted an eyebrow, he added, “I’m joking. Mostly.”

“Why is it so all-fired important that she marry?”

Blakeborough stared into the ballroom at his sister. “I want her to be happy. And the longer she lives alone with me, the more likely that she will be dragged down by my cynical temperament.”

“Ah. Now that, I understand.” He wanted Amanda to be happy, too. He just didn’t want to sacrifice his own happiness for it.

“You said you have a sister as well?” the earl asked.

“Yes. And if you think it’s hard to get your sister married off, you should try it with mine.”

“Unattractive, is she?”

“No, her looks aren’t the problem. Amanda runs four textile mills in America as competently as any man, which doesn’t exactly endear her to the male populace.”

“Yes, but does she have a tart tongue like my sister?”

Jeremy snorted. “Despite being a little slip of a thing, she cows fellows twice her size.”

“But surely she can’t be as suspicious of men as Yvette.”

“Only of every chap she meets. And though Amanda is quite pretty, she has a horrible sense of fashion. At least your sister knows how to dress well.”

“When she chooses. You should see her wearing her most ragged gown and her permanently ink-stained gloves, poring over dog-eared manuscripts with a pencil behind one ear. Half the time, that damned pencil looses her hair from its pins to fall down about her shoulders.”

Jeremy would love to see Lady Yvette with her hair down. Not that he’d mention that to her brother. “That can’t compare to Amanda at the mills. She wears trousers beneath her skirts. Says they’re necessary to her modesty when she has to climb the ladders.”

“Climbs ladders, does she?” Blakeborough chuckled. “She and Yvette will get along famously. A pity that I need a wife willing to live in England. I’d marry her myself.” He paused. “Does your sister even want to marry?”

“Who knows? Though I suspect she’d like to have children.”

Or maybe not, given the tragic deaths of Hannah and baby Theodore. That had made quite an impression on Amanda in her youth.

Shoving that painful memory to the back of his mind, he took a puff on his cigar. “But whether Amanda wants a husband or not, I’m selfish enough to want her to have one. Then she might stop plaguing me to return home and help her run the confounded mills. She could get her spouse to help her instead.”

Blakeborough laughed. “You should coax her to come here to gain a husband. I can think of any number of younger sons with fine educations, good characters, and sterling connections who have no chance of making something of themselves while their families limit them to the few opportunities that are open to respectable gentlemen in the clergy, law, or the military. They would welcome the chance to start anew somewhere abroad.”

Jeremy gaped at him. “What a brilliant idea! She’s actually on her way here and should arrive within the month with my mother in tow. If you’d be willing to introduce her to decent gentlemen who might not mind moving to the countryside of Pennsylvania—”

“I’d be perfectly willing . . . as long as you are willing to paint my sister’s portrait.” The earl cast him a calculating stare. “What do you say? Is that a trade you would consider?”

Hmm. Much as he hated doing portraits, he hated even more the idea of arguing with Amanda continually about his refusal to return home. Maybe if he could gain her a husband, he’d finally get some peace.

He glanced back into the ballroom. And who was to say that in the course of meeting his obligation, he couldn’t also convince Lady Yvette to model for the other work that had seized his imagination so thoroughly? He had a knack for charming women. Especially ones he wanted to paint.

“All right.” He thrust out his hand. “It’s a trade.”

Blakeborough brightened as he shook it vigorously. “You won’t regret it, I swear. We’ll get our sisters married off yet.”

And Jeremy would get his masterpiece at last.

Users Review

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