
THE AFFAIR

The Hollis Sisters
Book 1

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Chapter 1

N*ew York, September 1850*

Corinne Hollis knew she was a great beauty. At twenty-four-years-old, she was very close to being labeled a spinster, but the reality was she had more suitors at her disposal than a fresh debutante. The wealthy men of New York nearly tripped over themselves at every ball, soiree, or charity function for the opportunity to dance with her while some could only dream of kissing her plump pink lips.

Corinne let out a sigh as she sipped champagne from one of her mother's prized crystal flutes which had been one of the wedding gifts Mrs. Theodora Hollis had received from American shipping tycoon, the esteemed Mr. Ralph Hollis. The party had barely started, and she was already growing bored.

It seemed the same, boring people had come to tonight's party. Specifically, the same boring men. Men, Corinne was frankly tired of flirting with. She needed new blood, especially since many of the men she had grown up with were already properly married and the younger, eager

men bored her. Her mother told her it was high time she married, but Corinne wasn't interested in marriage, and the idea of being a matron was enough to make her call for smelling salts.

Her blue eyes flickered as she caught sight of her two younger sisters. The middle Hollis sister was four years Corinne's junior. Twenty-year-old Audrina and she shared similar features, coal black hair, stunning blue eyes, and porcelain skin. The similarities stopped there. While Corinne was petite with a curvy figure and a large bosom, Audrina was not. Audrina was tall and willowy. Her older sister had often said nastily that her body resembled more of a lanky, young boy's rather than a grown woman.

Audrina was talking pleasantly with the Forresters' youngest son, while the rather awkward young man stuttered, nearly spitting at her sister as he tried to make conversation. She looked away in disgust. Audrina could be such an overly sweet pushover at times. She had obviously not taken her elder sister's instruction to only flirt with men who looked handsome and could carry on a decent conversation.

She heard a loud squeal and saw her baby sister, sixteen-year-old Helene, clap her hands with glee at a small magic trick their elderly Uncle Arnold was performing to the small group of curious gazes. Corinne took another sip of her champagne, wondering why her parents had allowed Helene to attend tonight's ball when she was still so young. Her mother said it was for practice, but Corinne thought her youngest sister wouldn't be ready to enter New York society for years.

Helene was short and plump, her skin more pink than porcelain, and although her eyes were the same shade of blue as her sisters', her hair was a bright flaming red which

had resulted in Corinne teasing her for years by calling her "orange," "carrot," and "round sun."

One of the Hollises' servants bowed to her as he held up a tray. She placed her empty champagne flute on the silver tray and picked up a fresh one. It was barely eight and they hadn't had dinner yet. She was in for a long night indeed.

Worst of all, Corinne was feeling frisky and she almost desperately wanted to lie down with a man. Unlike most unmarried women her age, Corinne wasn't a simple-minded, ignorant idiot. She knew what exactly happened in the marriage bed. Or in any bed, really. Or chair. Or against the wall. And the men she made love with weren't exactly her husband, but each of them was more handsome than the next.

Perhaps that's why she wouldn't marry; the idea of lying with only one man was horrendous. Of course, women had affairs, but she didn't want to deal with a husband's insecurities or resentment, so single she remained.

Corinne still remembered the first man she had lost her maidenhood to, the one who taught her the pleasures of the naked flesh, Mr. Thomas Shepard. Mr. Shepard had married later that summer and Corinne had attended his wedding to wish him luck.

After Mr. Shepard, there had been Mr. Silver, then Mr. Connor, Mr. Williams, Mr. White, and so on. Some were already married with children of their own, others engaged, and others, like her, still without a wedding band on their finger. Despite her rendezvous with several men, Corinne managed to be very discreet, and she made sure her gentlemen partners remained discreet as well.

Which is why she had resorted to good old-fashioned blackmail. If any of the gentlemen she had been with ever

so much as hinted that Corinne had so much as kissed them, she was prepared to speak about their dirty secrets. Mr. Shepard had an illegitimate child who lived in Boston with the Shepards' former maid, Mr. Silver's father preferred men with a preference for burly male cooks, Mr. Connor had gambled away his inheritance, Mr. Williams took the virginity of the daughter of a Spanish duke during his time abroad, and Mr. White, in bed, did not last more than a minute and more often than not did not manage to please a lady.

If the men remained silent about their time with Corinne, she would take their secrets to the grave. Corinne knew she was risking a lot, not only her own reputation, but the possibility of pregnancy. Thankfully, she managed to avoid pregnancy by demanding the men to not finish inside her.

She squeezed her thighs together, desperate for some friction, though they weren't doing much. As she once again looked at her family's packed ballroom, she finally came to the conclusion she would have to bring herself to her own pleasure later that evening in her bedroom.

"Corinne!" Her friend, the recently married Mrs. Lavender Carrey, squeezed her tiny wrist as she nearly pulled her away to an empty part of the ballroom. "I have the most wonderful news. It seems we are going to have a most impressive guest joining us for a couple of weeks in our humble New York."

Corinne raised an eyebrow. After the past dull few weeks, she welcomed any sort of entertainment. Especially when it came to men. "Do tell. Where is this mysterious guest coming from?"

"England." Lavender's plush pink lips were pressed together in glee. "His name is Nicholas Barrett, and he is quite handsome."

"How do you know?" Corinne's breasts were practically heaving with excitement. Was this Nicholas a duke? A viscount? An earl? "Have you met him? Is he a prince perchance?"

"Yes, I know him. He doesn't have a title, but his family is old and respectable. Very wealthy, surely has more money than any of the gentlemen here." Lavender puffed up her chest in pride, obviously happy that for once she was the lady with the information. "He's Christopher's friend, actually. They met in a pub or somewhere when Chris was traveling abroad two years ago. Apparently, they have been corresponding and Christopher invited him to stay for a month. How I wish I were still unmarried so I could sink my claws into him."

Corinne whacked her hand teasingly. "Oh, Lavender, you're terrible. What will your husband say?" Lavender, though pretty enough, was too plain to catch the attention of a wealthy English gentleman. Corinne, on the other hand, was sure she could have Mr. Barrett wrapped around her finger. "Where is he? Is he here right now?"

"Mr. Barrett and Christopher were in the cigar room. I'm sure they will be here soon, and I will certainly have Christopher introduce you."

The two women talked about Lavender's recent honeymoon for a few minutes when Lavender finally gripped her hand. "Oh, Cor, there he is. Nicholas Barrett!"

Her blue eyes glanced toward Lavender's lanky brother Christopher, who was still unmarried. Next to him was the handsome and mysterious English gentleman. He was tall, much taller than Christopher and, overall, half of the men at the party. He had dark, black hair that curled around his ears, broad shoulders, and his eyes—oh, his eyes—they were the same shade of blue as Corinne's. It was a sign she should have him.

Lavender waved Christopher over as he joined the women with Nicholas following behind. Christopher greeted her shyly. He had always been smitten with her, but she had never given him the time of day. She thought he was too awkward and lacked intelligence.

"Christopher, I believe Miss Hollis hasn't met your new friend who has come to visit us from so far." Lavender fluttered her eyelashes at Nicholas.

"Of c-course," Christopher stuttered. "Miss Hollis, this is my f-friend, Mr. Nicholas Barrett. He has come from England to spend some time in New York. Mr. Barrett, this is the lovely Miss Hollis. Her parents are throwing tonight's ball in fact."

"Please, call me Corinne." Corinne made her voice sweeter as she discreetly pulled on her bodice to show off her round, pale breasts. "I do hope you are enjoying the party, Mr. Barrett."

"The party is wonderful, Miss Hollis," he answered politely, ignoring her request. "You and your family give this humble traveler a proper welcome."

Corinne frowned. The conversation was becoming too dry for her own good. Weren't Englishmen supposed to be more romantic? "There will be dancing later." She pulled her pink lips into a flirtatious smile. "I do hope I see you on the dance floor."

Her mother would be scandalized at the comments she was making. Mrs. Hollis believed young, unmarried women should be discreet and demure, but Corinne was too headstrong and didn't care much about the silent rules of society.

"I'm afraid I'm not fond of dancing, Miss Hollis." Nicholas turned to look at Christopher. "Now, Mr. Taylor, I believe you were going to introduce me to a Mr. Osborn."

"Of course. Miss Hollis, I do hope we can dance after dinner?" Christopher asked hopefully.

Corinne pretended she hadn't heard.

Nicholas gave a small bow. "Miss Hollis and Mrs. Carrey, I hope you have a lovely evening."

Corinne's jaw clenched. She had never felt so disrespected. It wasn't often she was snubbed. Most men couldn't resist her charm and the fact that Nicholas Barrett hadn't looked twice at her only seemed to irritate her.

She watched him leave with Christopher and despite the anger she felt at him, she couldn't help but think about how he would look bare-chested and lying next to her in her bed. She wanted to render him powerless and submissive to her. She wanted him to look at her with adoration and to kiss her feet. Corinne was used to being adored, not the other way around.

"We're heading into the dining room for dinner," Lavender quipped. "What are you serving for dessert?"

"Chocolate cake."

"Oh, wonderful!"

Corinne didn't feel very wonderful.

The next afternoon, the Hollis women gathered around in the drawing room to talk about their ball, which had ended in the early hours of the morning. Helene was playing with her annoying puppy, Fifi, by teasing her with a ribbon. Audrina was at the small writing desk, composing letters to their boring cousins in Boston, and her mother was nursing a headache from drinking too much champagne, by resting her head against the armchair.

Corinne, meanwhile, was lost in her own thoughts, still infuriated at what had happened the previous evening with Nicholas. His snub had insulted her and now, more than ever, she wanted him in her bed. After she had weakened

him into submission, she would let him go and both of them would be on their merry ways.

"Mother, I want to throw a party."

Mrs. Hollis threw her a weary look. "Why? We had one just yesterday."

Helene looked up.

Corinne ignored her youngest sister. "Mr. Christopher Taylor, Lavender's older brother, brought home a friend he met in England, a Mr. Nicholas Barrett. We were introduced but didn't get much time to talk." She then said what her mother truly wanted to hear from her eldest daughter. "Mother, I feel he is a man I can truly be serious about marrying."

Audrina snorted. "Are you sure this is not because he barely said two words to you yesterday, sister?"

"Oh, you keep quiet, Audrina," Corinne barked as she began rubbing her mother's tired shoulders. "Oh, Mother, please, just a small party. We'll have a small, intimate guest list. I'll help you plan it. We'll be the talk of the town. There doesn't even have to be dancing." She remembered Nicholas' comment. "It can be an intimate dinner party, oh please, Mother."

Mrs. Hollis looked at her wearily but with hope. "All right, Corinne, but only because this is the first man you've been serious about."