
THE SCANDAL

The Hollis Sisters

Book 2

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Chapter 1

N*ew York, March 1851*

Audrina Hollis was a week shy of her twenty-first birthday when she found out she was to be an aunt. Her blue eyes scanned the elegant penmanship written on the expensive English paper for confirmation of what she had read minutes ago.

The letter was from the eldest Hollis sister, the former Corinne Hollis, who, only last fall, had married the wealthy Englishman Nicholas Barrett and had promptly moved to the English countryside. Corinne was proudly informing her that she was to be a mother and if her calculations were correct, the baby would be born in early September in the same month the baby's parents had married.

Audrina had never thought the spoiled, vain, and selfish Corinne would be excited over the prospect of motherhood, but perhaps being married to Nicholas had smoothed out the rough edges. Either way, she was happy for her elder sister and wished her a healthy pregnancy.

A slow smirk appeared on her doll-shaped pink lips. The only bothersome thing about having Corinne be preg-

nant in another country, was the fact she wouldn't see her grow round with child. Corinne had always been terribly vain and competitive, to the point that she would grow jealous if Audrina looked even a tad bit better than she did. It would be nice to watch her fall from her imperious horse just this once.

"Does your sister write about anything interesting?" Mrs. Hollis didn't bother looking up from her needlepointing. Her tired eyes concentrated on the tiny stitches which were to eventually become gardenias.

Mrs. Hollis and Audrina were the only ones in the yellow sitting room. Her father rarely spent time outside of dinner with the Hollis women, and the youngest member of the Hollis family, seventeen-year-old Helene, was still staying with their Hollis cousins in Boston for one more month. It had just been Audrina and Mrs. Hollis for the past month.

"Corinne is expecting," Audrina replied with a smile. "The baby is due in September. She is quite joyful."

Mrs. Hollis raised an eyebrow but didn't express much emotion. The reason her eldest daughter and son-in-law had to marry so quickly last year had been because they had been caught behaving inappropriately in a coat room and it was clear she was still not over it. "It's nice to hear and I'm sure Mr. Barrett is happy to have gotten an heir off your sister."

Audrina clicked her tongue as she stood up to serve herself a cup of tea from the teapot in the back of the room. "We should send them a gift."

"Audrina, that tea is cold."

"I like it cold. You know I detest warm drinks. Or better yet, we should go visit Corinne in England. She'll need some support when the baby comes."

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"Mr. Barrett has more than enough money to hire multiple midwives to assist your sister."

Audrina snorted as she thought about how Corinne acted when she felt pain. She was a true terror. "Corinne will need her family more than any midwife when she's giving birth. She writes that Nicholas' younger sister, Antoinette, is gone so it will be the perfect time to bring her a helping hand. I know you and Daddy are not fond of traveling, but perhaps Helene and I can—"

"Audrina, I think you need to stop worrying about Corinne and start worrying about marriage," Mrs. Hollis blurted out as she put away her needlepointing. "You're turning twenty-one next week, high time a beautiful girl like you marries. Your father and I were talking about it, and after the shame Corinne caused this family last year, we think it best if you married quickly and properly, to set a good example for Helene, of course."

Helene Hollis wouldn't debut until next year, but Mrs. Hollis was already losing sleep since her youngest could be a bit odd and clumsy instead of charming and graceful. Audrina didn't know if she should be amused or annoyed at her mother.

On one hand, it was nice to have attention put on her instead of her elder sister, but on the other, she felt a bit peeved her parents were pressuring her to marry when she had been nothing but obedient.

"Is there someone you fancy, Audrina?" Mrs. Hollis pressed, her white hands shaking.

The middle Miss Hollis thought back to the many balls she attended weekly, and the name of one man came to mind. Ronald Osgood. Ronald was the third son of Joseph Osgood who was also part of New York's best families and who owned a series of luxury department stores.

"Ronald Osgood." Audrina stared shyly at the floor. "We've talked during dinners and shared dances and—"

"Ronald Osgood is a nice young man, but he is not an acceptable husband for you."

Audrina stiffened at her mother's curt attitude. "Why not?"

"He is still very young, only twenty-two, and he just graduated from university. He needs to sow his wild oats before he is mature enough to marry. Not to mention, his family is still fairly new. I would like you to marry into an old family like ours, even if these newcomers are appearing like fleas on a dog." Mrs. Hollis stood up and started twirling her fingers. "No, you need a mature man from a proper, New York family. Someone like Dominic Darlington."

Dominic Darlington? Audrina had no idea who he was, nor was she interested in him over Ronald. "I have never heard of Dominic Darlington," Audrina stated flatly.

"Nonsense, the Darlingtons are from a very old family like us. They are in the real estate business and banking, I believe. He's an only child, but one of his cousins married into the Astor family, and his mother and I participate in several charity boards."

Audrina was starting to lose her patience. "And I still have no idea who Mr. Darlington is."

"He travels a lot, darling, for work. He took over his father's many successful businesses and has hardly been in New York for longer than a week. However, he will be here next week." Mrs. Hollis squeezed her middle child's hand. "And when he is here, he will come to propose and to finalize your engagement. It has all been settled between your daddy and Mr. Darlington. All you have to do is say yes."

Audrina pulled back from her mother as if her hands

burned. Her hands twisted around a loose black curl that had slipped down from where it had been tightly pulled back. Surely, her mother had to be joking. Her parents, while not the most affectionate, had never been cruel. Cruel, like they were being now.

"You arranged my marriage? But why?" Her voice broke, almost becoming whiny and pathetic. She hated it. "I have been a good daughter to both of you. I do not deserve to be treated this way."

Mrs. Hollis's lip curled tightly. "After the embarrassment your sister put us through, your father and I cannot risk you and Helene not making a good match."

"But Ronald—"

"Is not that match. For heaven's sakes, Audrina he's a first love, a silly little infatuation. What you need is a *husband*."

Audrina gave her mother a wounded expression. "And what kind of man is this Dominic Darlington? Is he a good man? A kind man—"

"He is a *rich* man," Mrs. Hollis spat in exasperation. "A very rich man who will make you an even richer woman than you are now and who will be able to provide for you very well. Don't be stupid, Audrina, and throw away the opportunity many women, even Corinne, would be dying to get."

Audrina's entire body was trembling with a mixture of rage and desperation. She licked her lips and wondered how her life had managed to change in a matter of minutes. "I won't marry him."

Mrs. Hollis pressed a hand against the doorway and said softly, "You won't have a choice, darling. Neither your father nor Mr. Darlington will allow you to escape this marriage."

On the day of the appointed date, a large, heavy foot stepped in the doorway of the Hollises' entryway as the elderly butler scampered out of the way for fear of being knocked down on his feet by the very large man at the entrance.

Thirty-year-old Dominic Darlington knew he was an intimidating person, but as always, he did not care how his large six-foot-four, two-hundred-fifty pound body intimidated someone into submission. He had always assumed it was other people's problem if they were frightened by him.

Dominic was feeling exhausted and impatient as the Hollises' butler bowed so many times he thought he would break his foolish head off. He had just arrived from a trip to Spain after tying some loose ends on a property his late father had purchased, in order to make it into a large private boys' school.

As soon as he had landed, his mother had then started fussing him about his clothes and how shabby and improper they would be to meet this important Hollis family and if he would please cut his long blond hair to look slightly presentable. All things her only son immediately rejected. The marriage was as good as done. All he had to do was put a ring on the girl's finger and sign some papers. He would worry about the frills and ribbons of the actual wedding later.

Soon after his thirtieth birthday and before his trip to Spain, Dominic had told his mother that he wished to marry and sire an heir, but he had no wish to court anyone and play silly games. Did his mother know anyone appropriate?

Mrs. Darlington had said she did. Her name was Audrina Hollis, the middle child of Mr. and Mrs. Hollis

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and currently the only one available for marriage, as the eldest was married and living in England and the youngest wasn't out in society. Audrina was healthy, beautiful, and quiet which was what Dominic wanted. The last thing he needed was to deal with a wayward brat.

Before leaving for Spain, he had met with Mr. Hollis and signed the appropriate papers. He hadn't yet met Audrina formally, only in passing, but he had seen her portrait and knew she was a serious-faced young woman with jet black hair pulled back in tight ringlets, a fair complexion, and dark blue eyes. Yes, she would make a fine mother to his children.

Now, Dominic was here in the Hollises' house, ready to collect his chit, and still, he had not seen her. Was she really as shy as his mother said?

"Mr. Darlington," the butler wheezed as he motioned to the door. "Won't you please follow me into the yellow sitting room? Mr. and Mrs. Hollis will arrive shortly."

Dominic sighed, finally giving in to the old man. "And will Miss Hollis be joining us as well?"

The butler ignored the question. "And may I bring you tea, sir?"

"Brandy." Dominic knew it was bad manners to ask for alcohol in the sitting room, especially when women were to be present, but he needed some liquid courage if he was to propose soon.

"Uh, yes, Mr. Darlington, right away."

Dominic had been sipping impatiently on his drink when his future in-laws finally decided to grace him with their presence. They looked rather meek and sad, though Dominic didn't think it too odd. After all, they were marrying off a second daughter.

Mr. Hollis clapped him on the back. "Dominic, my

dear boy. Welcome back. How was Spain? My old bones haven't been there since I was a young lad of twenty."

"It was a business trip, not one of pleasure, I'm afraid. Mrs. Hollis." Dominic bowed his head and Mrs. Hollis curtsied. "Is Miss Hollis coming down soon, or is she ill?"

Mr. and Mrs. Hollis exchanged panicked, embarrassed glances. Mr. Hollis cleared his throat. "Well, you see, my dear boy, this is hard for me to say, but—"

Mrs. Hollis started twisting her handkerchief and pursing her thin lips as Dominic was starting to get very annoyed. The ring box he carried in his suit jacket was starting to feel heavy.

"Yes?" He tried to remain polite, they were his soon-to-be in-laws, after all, even if neither of them were making sense.

"She's not here," Mrs. Hollis finally said.

"What?" The words came out sharper than Dominic intended. "Where is she? Out with it."

"Mr. Darlington, I must insist you do not speak to my wife—"

"Mr. Hollis, with all due respect, I have been on a ship for weeks and have waited with eager anticipation for my fiancée. I have even brought her a ring. You can understand my disappointment when I come all this way and she is not here. Now, where is she? Is she out shopping?"

"Gone. She's gone." Mr. Hollis cleared his throat. "She left about a week ago, almost immediately after she found out her mother and I had arranged a match for her."

Dominic looked at him with weary green eyes. "You mean to tell me you did not tell her about our engagement until the last possible second? You didn't tell her I was to ask for her hand?" No wonder the chit had left. Dominic would have done the same thing.

"You do not know Audrina," Mrs. Hollis blurted out.

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"She is usually an obedient child. After the mess with her older sister, we thought she would react more maturely to the situation. That she would be grateful. Apparently, she is more childish than I thought."

A hundred thoughts appeared in Dominic's head. Most of them inspiring annoyance. How dare Audrina leave before they could properly discuss things? Yes, her parents should have spoken to her beforehand, but it didn't excuse her for leaving like a child. A small part of him also couldn't fathom the idea of being a jilted groom before even heading to the altar. Dominic Darlington wasn't used to losing, and he wasn't about to start now.

"We will, of course, annul the contract we had in place before you left for Spain, Mr. Darlington. I'll have my lawyer—"

"No," Dominic interrupted. "Miss Hollis and I will still marry as soon as I find her."

Mrs. Hollis hesitated. "Mr. Darlington, we have had the New York City police search discreetly for her and there has been no trace. We know she did not leave from a New York port, but that doesn't mean she didn't find another way to sail to England. Her sister, Corinne, and her husband live in England. I've written to Corinne, but it might be weeks before we know for sure if Audrina made it over there. I've also sent for my youngest daughter, Helene, to return from Boston to see if she knows anything, but more than likely, Audrina left for England—"

"Then I will go overseas," Dominic interrupted peevishly as if England were around the corner. "Rest assured, Mr. and Mrs. Hollis, I will find your daughter, and I will marry her."