

## Courting the Courtesan

Jen Yates

The door opened and she faced her greatest joy, her deepest sadness.

Why couldn't Lord Theodore Wolfenden, Earl of Pennington, have arrived in her life when she was still respectable?

Still available for marriage?

Still *suitable* for a man like him?

Now that she was none of these things it would've been infinitely happier for both of them if they'd never met.

And yet she could not wish it so.

To never have known Theo, his magnificence, his skill and passion, his love—would mean she'd lived to no purpose at all.

His deep green eyes raked from the top of her artfully tumbled wild red curls to the tips of her bare toes peeping beneath the froth of lace about the hem of the champagne silk peignoir he'd given her on his second visit almost a year ago.

Just the sight of him, head brushing the lintel and shoulders filling the entry, had her nipples tenting the luxurious material of the garment that was all she wore.

All she ever wore to receive him.

He blocked the doorway, his eyes hot and glowering.

A frisson of ice skittered down her spine as she realized it was anger not desire that made his eyes so bright.

She'd never seen him angry, not even when she'd refused, for the third time, to marry him.

His big body loomed over her, fists clenched at his sides.

He was a favorite with everyone at Madame Suzette's. Even Madame's notoriously picky Bichon Frise, FrouFrou, had been known to shamelessly solicit a ride in those caring, sheltering arms.

'Do you deny that I've asked you to marry me?' he growled.

Hands outstretched, she took a step towards him.

'Theo, what is this? How can I deny it when you have asked me three times—and I have refused you three times?'

Eyes narrowing and his body seeming to swell and fill the entire door space, he demanded, 'And do you deny that you love me?'

'Theo!' she cried, stamping her foot. 'You know I love you, but a courtesan does not become a countess, especially not an English countess. Such a thing might be condoned in France, but in your stuffy country? *Très inacceptable.*'

She would swear a smirk of satisfaction crossed his face before he turned about with a snarl.

'There you have it, Madame. By her own admission she has broken the house rules and I demand she pay the consequences.'

With this cold and bitter denunciation he stormed away down the hall, leaving her facing Madame Suzette who'd been concealed behind him.

The woman had been her friend and mentor since her parents had died leaving her to the mercy of a second cousin whose only offer of support had not included marriage.

Now Suzette's superior scrutiny slid across Angelique's person. Feeling like a small child about to be unfairly chastised for a minor demeanor, she waited, heart thumping in her chest, for something told her she was about to pay the cruelest price for falling in love.

‘You know the house rules,’ Madame Suzette said coldly. ‘Falling in love with a client severs your contract. You will remove yourself from this house immediately. My only concession will be the use of my carriage to take you to other accommodations—one hour from now.’

Ragged fury blinded her as the door snapped shut and Madame’s heels rattled away down the hall.

Incoherent with rage and betrayal, Angelique rang for her maid and inside the hour they were descending the steps of Maison Suzette—and she still hadn’t decided where she would go.

Where could she go and be certain of not being turned away?

Never had she been more deceived in a person. Suzette had professed to be her friend. As for Theo—he no doubt was not used to being told ‘no’.

She would not think about Theo.

Could not.

Her very survival and that of Mimi, her faithful maid, depended on her keeping a clear head. Thinking of Theo must wait until they had a roof over their heads and beds to sleep in. Then she could indulge in the hysterics that threatened to overtake her if she once relaxed the iron control she held over her emotions.

A footman handed her up into the carriage where already her luggage was secured. Mimi made to follow her, but the footman directed her up onto the driving seat beside the coachman.

Before Angelique could remonstrate and demand Mimi ride inside the carriage, strong arms closed about her and she was enveloped in the gloriously familiar scents of bergamot and sandalwood—and Theo.

How dare he? He’d got her sacked and now he came to gloat at her dismissal?

Generally she fought to control the temper that matched her wild red hair, but at this moment she was beyond reining it in. Her arm drew back and a slap was administered before either of them had spoken a word.

‘Hush, my lovely,’ Theo growled softly, caging her hands against his chest and covering her mouth with his. ‘I collect,’ he murmured between wickedly teasing forays with his tongue, ‘that you would like to flay the skin from my hide.’

She would not respond. *Mon Dieu*.

‘*Ta grande bête*. Do you deny you have ruined my life?’ she hissed through clenched teeth.

‘By getting you sacked?’

He lifted his head and she could just see his outline against the window. Arrogance in every line.

‘*Oui. Toutefois*. Even so!’

With a rich rumbling chuckle, he cupped her face and held her still for more languid, inciting kisses.

‘You would not marry me—because you were a courtesan. Now you are no longer a citizen of the demimondaine. You are plain Comtesse Angelique de la Tremouille. And no one could be more proper than she as the Countess of Pennington. Shut up and kiss me, Angel. I will not hear ‘no’ from these lips again!’