



Lessons of Desire (Rothwell)

By Madeline Hunter

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Handsome, suave, and carnal as the devil, Lord Elliot Rothwell awaits readers in **Lessons of Desire**, bestselling author Madeline Hunter's latest book in the Rothwell series and her most provocative novel to date. A man used to getting what he wants, Elliot is every woman's most secret fantasy in the living flesh.

He first appears beneath her prison window as her savior—a sinfully attractive man whose charm and connections have ensured her release from an unjust arrest. But author and publisher Phaedra Blair quickly learns that the price of her “freedom” is to be virtually bound to her irresistible rescuer. For Elliot Rothman didn't come solely on a mission of goodwill. He came to extract a promise that Phaedra won't publish a slanderous manuscript that could destroy his family's name, and he's not above bribery, threats, or bedding her to get his way. And with each erotic encounter raising the stakes between them, Elliot discovers he's ever more reluctant to lose this sensual game...or the one woman who's every bit his match.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Madeline Hunter is a nationally bestselling author of historical romances who lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and two sons. In a parallel existence to the one she enjoys as a novelist, she has a Ph.D. in art history and teaches at an East Coast university.

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Chapter One

A man who has committed a crime needs to cover his tracks, even if he made them while wearing the best shoes that money can buy.

In order to cover his, Lord Elliot Rothwell reentered his family's London home amidst the late arrivals to his brother's ball. He acted like a young man who had briefly gone out to take some air on this glorious, breezy May night.

With one step over the threshold he no longer entered but instead greeted. The tall, handsome, youngest brother of the fourth Marquess of Easterbrook—the Rothwell sibling considered the most amiable and normal—bestowed smiles on everyone and very warm ones on certain ladies.

A quarter hour later Elliot slid into a conversation with Lady Falrith as smoothly as he had just slipped back into the ballroom. He resumed a topic aborted two hours earlier, and flattered the lady so adroitly that she forgot that he had excused himself long ago. Within minutes Lady Falrith ceased to care about the passage of time.

While Elliot charmed Lady Falrith he scanned the crush in the ballroom for his brother. Not his brother Hayden, who along with his new wife, Alexia, was hosting this ball. He sought the eye of his other brother, Christian, Marquess of Easterbrook.

Christian's gaze never met his but Elliot's return to the ball was noted. Christian disengaged from a circle of lords on the far side of the room and walked to the door.

Elliot danced a waltz with Lady Falrith before continuing this night's mission. He did so in penance for using the lady, and in silent thanks for her unwitting aid. Lady Falrith's sense of time could be fluid, and her memory very optimistic. By the morning she would believe that Elliot had attended on her all night and was in pursuit of her. Her confidence in her own appeal would prove useful should something untoward develop regarding his activities in the city tonight.

The waltz over, he again excused himself. Unlike Christian, who had walked in isolation and with purpose for the door, Elliot strolled down the ballroom sociably, greeting and chatting until he sidled next to his new sister-in-law, Alexia.

"It is going well, don't you agree?" she asked. Her gaze swept the chamber, seeking empirical confirmation.

"It is a triumph, Alexia." And it was, for her. A triumph of spirit and character, and maybe a triumph of love.

Alexia was not the sort of woman whom society had expected Hayden to marry. She had no family and no fortune. She was so sensible that she had never learned how to dissemble, let alone flirt. Yet here she was hosting a grand ball in the home of a marquess, her dark hair impeccably styled and her headdress and garments the last word in fashion. The penniless orphan had married a man who loved her in a way he had never loved before.

Elliot trusted the marriage would be a good one. Alexia would see to that. History had proven that love was a dangerous emotion for Rothwell men. Sensible, practical Alexia would know how to use the love to keep the danger corralled, however. Elliot suspected that she had already tamed the beast several times.

He joined her in admiring the night's success. In the far corner a small, pale woman held court. One too many plumes flourished in the headdress decorating her blonde hair. All the while she kept one gleaming eye on the male attention being paid to a pretty girl nearby.

"The triumph is yours, Alexia, but I think that my aunt intends to take home the biggest prize this hunting season."

"Your aunt Henrietta is understandably happy about Caroline's first season. Two titles have paid addresses of late. However, she is vexed with me tonight because I did not invite one of those titles to this ball, despite her command to do so."

Elliot had little interest in his aunt's vexations. He did, however, have a strong interest in the guest list.

"I have not seen Miss Blair, Alexia. No black habits. No undressed hair. Did Hayden forbid you to invite her?"

"Not at all. Phaedra is abroad. She embarked over a fortnight ago."

He did not want to appear too curious, but . . . "Abroad, you say?"

Her violet eyes warmed with humor. She gave him all of her attention, which, considering the subject, he would rather not have.

"Naples first, then a tour of the south. I told her that you say it is unwise to visit Italy in the heat of summer, but she spoke of desiring to investigate the rituals and feasts of that season." She inclined her head confidentially. "I believe that her father's passing affected her more than she admits. Her final meeting with him was an emotional one. It distressed her. I believe she undertook this voyage in order to lift her spirits."

He did not doubt a deathbed parting with a father could be emotional. His own had touched him indelibly. Tonight, however, he was more interested in Miss Blair's whereabouts, and in matters that had been discussed with her father before they made that permanent farewell.

"If you know where she planned to reside in Naples, I will call on her when I go if she is still there."

"She did leave a residence that she hoped to use. She had learned about it from a friend. If she has not returned prior to your own journey, I will be grateful if you call on her. Her independence sometimes leads to carelessness, so I do worry about her."

He doubted Phaedra Blair took well anyone's worrying about her. Alexia was very good to do so anyway.

"Oh, dear," muttered Alexia.

He saw what caused the sigh that followed. Henrietta aimed for them, her plumes dancing and her dreamy, sparkling eyes displaying glints of determination.

"I think she is after *you*," Alexia whispered. "Float away, or she will bend your ear complaining how Easterbrook permitted me to host a ball without asking for her agreement. She thinks her residence in this house makes her the mistress of it."

Elliot could float with the best of them. He was long gone downstream before his aunt arrived.

After a quick cut to the servants' corridor and a fast nip up the back stairs, Elliot approached Christian's chambers. He entered the sitting room to find his brother lounging in a chair in the corner. The sharp look Christian shot at him proved Easterbrook's mind was not nearly as relaxed as his body.

"I did not find it," Elliot said, answering the question those dark eyes asked. "If it is in his offices or his home, it is very well hidden."

Christian audibly exhaled. The sound carried his annoyance that this matter had recently interrupted his freedom to spend his days doing whatever it was that he normally did. Elliot had no idea what those activities might be. No one really knew what Christian was about anymore.

"On knowing he was about to die, he may have burned it," Elliot suggested.

"Merris Langton displayed a character that was unlikely to think of sparing others, even when he was at death's door." Christian crooked a finger under the top of his perfectly tied cravat and gave a little yank to loosen it.

Christian appeared splendid tonight, every inch the lord of the realm. His coats and linens announced their superior quality with every thread. His gesture with the cravat hinted at his discomfort with the night's formality, however, as surely as the long queue of his unfashionably long, dark hair indicated his eccentric bent.

Elliot assumed his brother longed to shed the sartorial symbols of civilization and swathe himself in that exotic robe he often wore. One normally found him barefoot in these chambers, not wearing silk hose and pumps. Currently the only hint of his normal dishabille in the house was the unbuttoned frock coat and the liquid manner in which his tall body molded itself to the chair's upholstery.

"You checked for loose floorboards and such?" Christian asked.

"I risked discovery to do so. I was in both buildings too long, and a constable passed by as I left the City offices. It is dark, there was no lamp near the door, however . . ."

His description of his adventure suggested more caution than he had experienced. He believed there were occasions when there was no choice except to break a law, but he had never expected to be so coldly indifferent to doing so when such an occasion arrived for him.

"You have been at this ball all night, should any questions arise," Christian said. "Langton owned a small

publishing house that favored radical texts. He was also a man with a taste for blackmail, as we have learned. The pity is that he went and died before I could pay him off. Now Richard Drury's manuscript is God knows where, and its sordid lie about our father may yet see the light of day."

"I will make sure it does not."

"Do you think someone else got to it before you? I am probably not the only person Langton approached."

"I saw no indication that anyone had gone through his belongings yet. Not even his solicitor or executor. He was only buried this afternoon. I do not think it was in either place when he died."

"That is damned inconvenient."

"Inconvenient but not insurmountable. I will find it, and I will destroy it if necessary."

Christian's attention narrowed on him. "You speak with confidence. You know where that damned manuscript is, don't you?"

"I have a good idea. If I am right, we will be done with this soon. It may still cost you."

"Pay. Richard Drury was a member of Parliament and, despite his extreme views, a respected intellectual. If his memoirs include such an accusation against my father, many will believe it."

They will believe it because it fits with what they already think to be true. Elliot did not voice the response, but it had whispered in his head since first hearing that Merris Langton planned to publish Richard Drury's posthumous memoirs. The book would include secrets and gossip that reflected badly on many of the great and powerful, both past and present. The accusation it purportedly contained about their father fit too well what society already assumed about his parents' marriage.

Society had been wrong about most of it, however. His own father had explained that to him at a moment when men do not lie.

You were her favorite. She kept you to herself and I allowed it since you were the youngest. It was a relief to see her remember she was a mother at times. Only now here I am dying and I barely know you. I do not expect love or grief from you, but I'll not go with you thinking I am a monster like she probably told you I am.

"Where do you think the manuscript is? I demand that you keep me informed every step of the way, Elliot. If you are not making progress, I will handle this myself."

It was not clear just how Christian would handle it. That ambiguity had led Elliot to take the charge on himself. His brother might be ruthless in silencing these echoes from the past.

"Although I did not find the manuscript, I did discover financial papers in Langton's office. That press is in trouble. Of more interest were documents regarding the ownership of the press. Richard Drury had been a silent partner from the start. That is no doubt why Langton received those memoirs."

Christian found that interesting. "We will have to approach Langton's solicitor and see who gets it all now."

"The documents indicated that Drury's share was bequeathed to his only child. There is a living partner still to deal with, who probably was complicit in the little blackmail scheme from the start."

"His only child? Hell." Christian pressed his head against the chair's back cushion, closed his eyes, and emitted an exasperated groan. "Not Phaedra Blair. Damnation."

"Yes, Phaedra Blair."

Christian muttered another curse. "How like Mr. Drury, with his radical views and unconventional life, to bequeath a business partnership to a woman, and his illegitimate daughter at that." His lids lowered. "Of course, she may be glad for the money if the press is in trouble. She may even welcome a reason not to publish her father's memoirs. They are no doubt full of private matters regarding her and her mother."

"Possibly." Elliot was not optimistic that negotiations would be so simple. Miss Blair was an unwelcome complication.

She might see in those memoirs and their secrets the making of a strong seller that would save that press. Or worse, she might believe her notions of social justice would be served by revealing the underbelly of polite society.

"Her own book was published by Langton, wasn't it? It is in the library here somewhere. I confess I never read it. I have little interest in mythology and folklore, let alone the syncretist studies on it," Christian said.

"I have heard that the scholarship was more than respectable." Elliot believed in giving the devil her due, as it were. "She inherited her parents' intelligence along with their indifference toward rules of conduct and conformity."

"Under the circumstances, none of her legacies is good news for us." Christian rose to his feet. He buttoned his coat and checked his collar in preparation for returning to the ball. "Best if you did not tell Hayden about any of this. He is very protective of his new wife, and Miss Blair is one of Alexia's friends. If you are obligated to get harsh it would be better if they remained ignorant."

"Miss Blair sailed for Naples two weeks ago. I will deal with her before she and Alexia can have another tête-à-tête."

"Will you be following her?"

"I had intended to travel there this autumn anyway. I want to study the recent excavations at Pompeii for my next book. I will move my journey forward now."

They walked side by side to the staircase. With each step the strains of music grew louder and the gentle roar of voices filled the majestic spaces. As they descended into the gay crush, Elliot noticed Christian's hooded, distracted expression.

"Do not be concerned, Christian. I will make sure that the accusation against Father is never printed."

Christian's fleeting smile did not clear his expression. "I do not doubt your abilities or resolve. That is not what I was contemplating just now."

"Then what?"

"I was thinking about Phaedra Blair, and wondering if any man can, as you put it, deal with her."

Elliot walked in darkness, his way lit by the flame of the small lamp that he carried.

The guests were gone and the servants slept. Hayden and Alexia were probably enjoying the marriage bed in their house on Hill Street. Christian might still be awake but he would not leave his chambers for several days now.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

John Barstow:

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