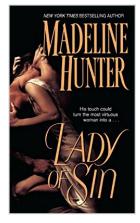
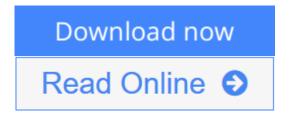
Lady of Sin (The Seducers series Book 7)



By Madeline Hunter



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Award-winning author Madeline Hunter transports readers back to the scandal and intrigue of nineteenth-century England in the enthralling tale of a magnetically sensual man, a virtuous woman, and a love story that will take your breath away....

She arrives at his home without warning or invitation, determined to win him to her campaign to reform women's rights. Instead, Charlotte, the widowed Baroness Mardenford, ends up being nearly seduced by Nathaniel Knightridge. No woman is safe from the mesmerizing sensual power of the famed courtroom advocate, and Charlotte discovers she is no exception. But does he recognize her as the masked woman who recklessly joined him in forbidden passion a month ago? And how to avoid becoming his *Lady of Sin* when he decides to pursue her again?

From the Paperback edition.

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Lady of Sin (The Seducers series Book 7) By Madeline Hunter Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #287061 in eBooks
- Published on: 2006-02-28
- Released on: 2006-02-28
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Aristocratic lawyer Nathaniel Knightridge and young widow Charlotte Mardenford hate each other—or so Hunter's lusty 19th-century romance would have readers believe, based on their inveterate insistence ("Mr. Knightridge and I *truly* do not care for each other") and their stagy arguments. Naturally, it comes as no shock to the reader when they realize their mutual attraction—the deeply meaningful looks they exchange get so much attention, they almost constitute separate characters. Complicating the woefully uncomplicated love/hate relationship is their soul-stirring encounter at an anonymous orgy, at which Nathaniel fails to recognize a masked Charlotte. Though their forced hostility quickly wears thin, a subplot concerning a mysterious young boy who may be connected to Charlotte's family lends the story some much-needed intrigue, and Hunter handles this thread well, doling out hints bit by bit and throwing in a few clever twists. Unfortunately, Hunter's protagonists lack the depth of those in her medieval-era romances (*By Design*, etc.), and her overblown language adds little to their relationship. (*Feb.*)

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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.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. *Chapter One*

Nathaniel Knightridge dwelled in a special hell, one where men of action and command are rendered powerless by events beyond their control.

Chained in that underworld of the spirit, he awaited the dreadful result of his impotence. The chill in his body could not be warmed by either the fire he sat beside or the brandy he freely imbibed.

The spirits dulled his mind enough to keep his futile fury contained, but not so much that he did not hear every damned tick of the damned clock. It constantly poked at his soul from its place on a far table in the sitting room of his apartment at Albany.

He stared at the fire's flames, all too aware that his vigil paled compared to another being endured a few miles away.

"Sir." The address came quietly. Tentatively.

Nathaniel slowly turned his gaze to the doorway. Jacobs, his manservant, stood there. Jacobs's aging, cherubic face wore a caution born of Nathaniel's angry outbursts all day long.

"A lady is here, sir. She went to your chambers and your clerk directed her here. She insists it is most important."

"If she is here, she cannot be too much a lady."

"Oh, but she is." Jacobs proffered a silver salver. "Her card, sir."

"Tell her I am not receiving."

"But it is--"

"Send her away, damn you."

Jacobs left. Nathaniel poured more brandy. He did not need to look at the clock to know the time. A half hour remained, no more.

He gulped enough of the spirits to send his mind flying for a few blissful moments.

It did not last. Soon he was back in the chair, half-foxed but mercilessly aware. Of the clock. And of voices. Jacobs's and a woman's. Their alternating high and low rumble approached and grew louder until the words became audible.

"I tell you again, my lady, that Mr. Knightridge is not receiving."

"And I tell you that this cannot wait. I do not have the leisure to waste another day looking all over town for him."

Despite the muffling effects of the thick door, that voice sounded familiar. Nathaniel's dulled sense tried to poke around his fogged brain to identify it.

The door opened. Jacobs entered, looking apologetic and helpless. A woman sailed in behind him.

Nathaniel took in the dark hair beneath the crepe bonnet's cream brim, the middling height of perfect posture, the crimson mantle trimmed in fur. Her hand grasped the ivory handle of a parasol.

As she brazenly intruded on his private misery, she passed one half-draped window. The overcast day's silver light revealed her lovely, determined face.

"Oh, God have mercy," Nathaniel muttered.

"Charlotte, Lady Mardenford," Jacobs announced.

Charlotte waited for Mr. Knightridge to stand and greet her. Instead he propped his elbow on his chair's arm and rested his forehead in his hand. The pose communicated weary resignation. It also obscured his eyes.

Dark eyes. Deep set and compelling. They contrasted dramatically with his golden hair.

Those eyes could mesmerize like an actor's and he used them to deliberate effect. Mr. Knightridge did not perform in the theater, but he was known to command different kinds of stages. Those in courtrooms and drawing rooms.

Women were especially vulnerable to his magnetic presence. That was one reason why Charlotte had sought him out today despite her determined efforts to avoid him the last month.

The other reason for her visit, the one that had led her to this apartment today and not his chambers tomorrow, involved his seclusion in this shadowed sitting room and his disheveled appearance.

He finally acknowledged her with a sour, exasperated glance. A long strand of his collar-length hair hung over one eye in a lazy, sinuous curve. His waistcoat was unbuttoned and his collar and cuffs loose. He was the kind of man who still looked handsome when he was unkempt. Disarray became him. She could do without the roguish danger he projected in this state, however.

She removed her mantle and handed it to the servant, who retreated. She positioned herself so that she could not be ignored.

Mr. Knightridge remained in his deeply upholstered, high-backed green chair, his tall body slouched and stretched. He looked her over slowly. Annoyance hardened his countenance.

Then it faded, as if other thoughts had claimed his mind.

He turned his face away and gazed into the flames. His hair, swept back from his high brow except for the errant lock, permitted his profile to chisel the space around it. With its high cheekbones and straight nose and full lips, it was a classically handsome face but not very soft even in the best of situations, which this definitely was not.

The chamber fell silent, except for the ticking of a clock on a far table.

Charlotte had not expected the visit to start this badly. Then again, she had not anticipated joyful welcome either. After all, she and Nathaniel Knightridge did not like each other very much.

"You are being rude," she said.

He sighed. "No, madam, you are being rude. My man told you I am not receiving, and I will not humor this inexplicable invasion. I am in no mood for social calls today. Jacobs will see you out."

"This is not a social call. I am here to discuss business."

"In case you did not notice, I am almost drunk and intend to be thoroughly so, very soon. I am in no condition to conduct business, so it must wait."

"It cannot wait."

"Then find another man to irritate with it."

They had never rubbed well together, but he was being unusually blunt today. His behavior would be inexcusable if she did not know the reason for it.

She set down her parasol so he would know she did not intend to leave. The action drew his attention back to her.

"This may not be a good day to put aside your weapons, Lady Mardenford."

"I have never needed weapons with you."

"You act as if you do. You carry a parasol like a sword. You have one with you even in winter when the sun does not shine. I keep expecting you to stab me with it."

"I would never stab you. I might hit you with it if you gave me cause, but never stab."

"If you insist on staying, I may give you such cause. Hence my warning."

"You are being deliberately provocative today. While you have never been what I would call gracious, this is extreme."

His gaze sharpened, then warmed as it took her in again. Male calculation reflected in his eyes. Deep, predatory sparks in them made her nape prickle.

It was a boldly familiar gaze, and it aroused both caution and concern in her, along with an irritating, sensual stirring. It was not a look that a gentleman should let a lady see. It entered her head that his inebriated state not only freed him from the normal constraints but also permitted him to perceive and remember more than he did while sober.

"You are a fine one to speak of being provocative. It is no mistake, I think, that you donned that dress for this visit. It shows a lot of shoulder. When I see that much of a woman's skin, I know she wants something." He smiled, not kindly. "What is it you want, Lady M.?"

She felt the skin he observed flushing. Her cross bodice did show a bit of shoulder and neck, but not enough to warrant comment. Nor had she chosen it because of this visit. She had a full day scheduled and could not bear spending hours on the town trussed into the stiff stomachers that had become fashionable again for some malicious reason.

Just like Mr. Knightridge to assume a woman dressed only for his benefit.

She composed a sharp response, only to realize he wasn't waiting for one. His mind had turned elsewhere again. She thought she knew where.

The clock chimed the three-quarter hour. It startled him out of the reverie into which he had drifted. "You really should leave. Your visiting me alone could create a scandal."

"If anyone saw me arrive, which no one did, they would assume I sought your counsel, just as I am doing. Besides, the whole town knows we do not have a warm friendship. My reputation is quite safe with you."

Since he showed no inclination to invite her to sit, she took it upon herself to do so. She perched on a canebacked settee that faced him. From her new position she could see a decanter and glass on the rug beside his chair.

"When you hear why I have come, you will not mind the intrusion," she said.

"I promise you that I will, since I already do."

"Hear me out, that is all I ask. As you know, I am hosting a meeting in four days' time. The goal is to begin petitions to send to Parliament requesting changes in the laws governing married women. Including, of course, the laws on divorce."

"I received your invitation. You did not need to call."

"I feared you would not accept because of our--well, our occasional disagreements."

"Occasional? Madam, you and I are incapable of forming a right understanding on any subject."

That was not true. Twice they had come to complete agreement. One time they had not even needed words to know the other's mind.

Of course, he was unaware of that. She was the only one who had incurred a debt because of it.

She forged ahead. "I have come to explain why you need to be there. Three times now you have served as defense counsel in trials that touched on the misery some wives endure--"

"Four. I have been involved in four such trials. There was one you would not know about. But go on, please." His voice sounded bored, as if she engaged half his attention at best.

"You have seen and heard firsthand how some women suffer. You know better than most the inequities under the law. If you attend the meeting, your mere presence will lend weight to our cause."

"The testimony of lawyers who argue divorces in the ecclesiastical courts will aid you more. My experience only touches on the cases where a bad union leads to tragedy, and those examples will only turn many against you."

"I think you are wrong. There is great sympathy for women who have needed the voice you lend. Also, your fame alone will attract others to the meeting."

He began to respond, but stopped. His eyes glazed. What little attention he gave her flew away.

His hand reached down, found the decanter, and poured liquid into the glass. Lifting the glass, he rose and walked away.

Toward the ticking clock.

"What say you, sir? Will you attend?"

He stood at the other side of the chamber, his back to her. He tilted his head to drink.

"You want me there because I am notorious."

"Not notorious. Famous."

"It is the fame of a circus performer."

"You are much admired. The ladies in particular will appreciate your presence, as you well know."

"You want me because I will attract a crowd? Worse than a circus performer, then. I will be your dancing dog at a village market."

"You will dance to a very pleasant tune. I daresay you will have your pick of the gawkers when all is done, so there will be compensation."

She expected that to recapture his attention. At least she expected a barbed response. Instead he did not move or speak. He just stood there near the clock. Silence fell until only its ticks sounded.

She searched for something else to say, something to disperse the terrible atmosphere gathering. Normally Mr. Knightridge and she ended up arguing when they spoke at all, and a row would be better than this.

Anything would be preferable to the awful expectation that thickened the air.

Time stretched and slowed. The clock's sounds got louder as the silence deepened. They became a beat matching the throb in her chest. From the way his stance grew taut, she knew the hour's chime was imminent.

"My apologies, Lady Mardenford, but I am too drunk to behave civilly. You should leave now." Yes, she probably should.

She could not. She sensed his turmoil and it twisted her heart. He stood tall, strong, and straight, but he looked very alone there. Almost . . . vulnerable.

She owed him much more than he would ever guess, and sharing this terrible vigil was the least of it.

She knew when the moment was almost upon them. He threw back the last of his brandy, then went deathly still. She realized she was gripping the arm of her settee so hard that her fingers hurt.

The clock chimed twice.

The sounds echoed in the chamber for a long time, then left a quaking silence.

Nathaniel abruptly turned. He hurled his glass. It flew across the chamber into a window, smashing a pane on its path out to the city.

The sudden movement and explosion made her jump.

She could see his face now. Eyes blazing and teeth bared, he wore a mask of fury. Beneath the anger, however, deep in those eyes, something else burned. Raw anguish.

She had not expected such a violent reaction. She had not known it would affect him this deeply.

It had probably been unwise to come. She should have left when he asked, but she had not. Now she was glimpsing something she had no right to see.

His hard gaze moved from the shattered window to her. His glare made her swallow hard.

She stood and took a few steps toward him. "It was not your fault. You did your best."

His eyes blazed as he realized that she knew what this hour meant. "An innocent man just hanged. Man, *hell*. He was a *boy*. It does not matter that I did my best. It wasn't good enough, damn it."

"You do not know for certain Harry Binchley was innocent. Perhaps--"

"He committed crimes enough in his short life, but not this murder."

"You cannot be sure of that."

"I *know*." He advanced on her. "Do you think I do this for my amusement? For the *fame* you say I have? I know the guilt or innocence of those I defend or I would not speak for them."

He walked right up to her until he was so close she had the urge to step back. "I look in their eyes and it is all there. No matter how jaded or cold those eyes may be, the soul is visible if you look deeply enough."

He looked in her eyes that way. His gaze pierced them until she feared he really could see her soul.

She fought to hold the invasion at bay. She scrambled to throw up barriers to protect the corners that no one should ever see. Even she did not inspect some of them.

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