Ruby Schmidt is visiting the family of her dearest friend and fellow artist, Willow Wycke, at the Wycke’s farm in the Brandywine Valley of Pennsylvania…

Though Ruby and Willow hoped to escape to Ruby’s room after lunch, Mrs. Wycke waylaid them. “Would you girls kindly accompany me to the library?”

Once she closed the pocket doors, and leather-bound volumes were their only companions, Mrs. Wycke seated Ruby and Willow side by side on a settee and pulled a chair for herself before them.

“Girls, I’ve had this discussion with Woodrow. I shall repeat it when little Henry is of an appropriate age.”

From her pocket, she removed two tins of sewing needles and placed them in her lap. She flicked her tongue over her lips twice and began uncertainly. “Marriage, as it is currently defined, gives a husband legal ownership of his wife’s body. He is allowed to take her as he desires, with or without her consent. A woman should have control of her own body, a right inseparable from her very existence.”

Willow blinked. “Mamá!”

Ruby, her cheeks burning, glanced at Mrs. Wycke.

Mrs. Wycke’s thick wedding ring clanked against the tins as her fingers jiggled nervously. “Women are just as intelligent, just as capable, as men. Constant pregnancies keep us from achieving our own lofty goals. Men have no such impediment, do they?”

“No, Mamá.”

“You may rightfully say no to any man, including your husband, to avoid an unwanted child.” Her eyes blazed with a zealot’s fire. “Having said that, should you
find—as I have found with my darling Mr. Wycke—a most uncommon bond, you may not wish to say no.”

Though her words had been hesitant at first, they came now at a full gallop. “A healthy woman has as much passion as any man and can be as attracted to a man as he to her. Our learned Mr. Whitman says in his *Leaves of Grass*: ‘Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex, Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.’”

She pried off the lid of a tin and extracted, not needles, but a translucent cylinder which she pinched between two fingers and held before her, her eyes squeezed closed. “I wish you both to avoid pregnancy until you are prepared in heart, mind, and soul to care for a child. These”—she wiggled the cylinder slightly in the air—“are called *condoms*. Thanks to Mr. Comstock’s antiquated obscenity laws, they may no longer be ordered by mail. But a gentleman should know where to purchase them. I believe they are available in most apothecaries.” She opened her eyes, replaced the condom in the needle case, and handed each young woman a tin. “A man must place one on his part...on his...on his manhood...before he...” She swallowed hard then finished in a rush, “...before he commits the deed.”

Ruby wondered if her ma realized a woman might avoid pregnancy. If so, she had chosen childbirth, though the state led to her many miscarriages.

With a delicate cough, Mrs. Wycke continued. “In addition, there are ways of attaining the satisfaction of your mutual desires that do not involve the risk of bearing a child. I shall leave you and your husbands to discover what can be done with...fingers...mouths...and other... orifices.”
Ruby’s face heated violently as she thought of Bismarck and their explorations of each other.

With a few final words of warning, Mrs. Wycke wound up her talk. “Choose your spouses well, my dears. Marry a man like my dear Mr. Wycke, a ‘suffrage husband’ who believes not only in women’s political equality but in a woman’s rights in the bedroom.” She clapped her hands together, clearly congratulating herself on a job well done, then shooed the younger women from the library.

That evening, Willow slipped into Ruby’s room after preparing for bed. “I do hope Mamá’s little chat didn’t offend you.”

“She is rather forthright.” Ruby laughed as she dropped on her bed. “Ma lost a baby just before I left. Her eleventh confinement in twenty years. She miscarried it, as she lost all but four of us.” Ruby shook her head. “I should hate spending half my life with child. How can a woman care for a clutch of chicks and still paint?” At the same time, the thought of a babe or two was not unappealing. She could see herself with a small family, children widely spaced to allow her time to breathe.

“And housewife! What an odious word. First, foremost, always, my waking thought, from the moment I was conceived, has been my desire to be an artist.” Willow hugged Ruby. “I shan’t ever have children. I shall give birth to paintings. Ruby, my dearest sister, we shall love each other. Our offspring will be our art, and we shall be more fruitful than any male artist.”