

## TO PLEASURE A LADY

### EXCERPT - CHAPTER ONE

*I vow the new earl will drive me to distraction, thinking to marry us off like so much breeding stock.*

— Letter from Miss Arabella Loring to Fanny Irwin

*London, May 1817*

*Matrimony.* The very word was menacing. Yet the new Earl of Danvers could ignore the topic no longer, much to his regret.

"A pity the late earl already met his end," Lord Danvers professed, punctuating his declaration with the slash of a steel rapier. "Otherwise I would have his heart on a spit for the trick he served me, leaving me to play procurer for three wards I never wanted."

His complaint, voiced amid the sounds of swordplay, was met with both sympathetic laughter and skepticism from his friends.

"Procurer, Marcus? Isn't that something of an exaggeration?"

"It perfectly describes my responsibility."

"Matchmaker is a more tasteful characterization."

*Matchmaker.* What a lowering thought.

Marcus Pierce, formerly addressed as Baron Pierce and now the eighth Lord Danvers, winced with reluctant humor. Although he normally relished a challenge, he would gladly have forgone being saddled with three penniless beauties—and worse, the burden of finding them respectable husbands.

Yet he'd inherited the Loring sisters along with his new title, so he was resigned to discharging his duty sooner or later.

Preferably later.

Marcus had enjoyed thirty-two pleasurable years of bachelorhood, the last ten as one of England's most eligible and elusive marital catches. Since matrimony ranked high on his list of least-favorite subjects, he had put off facing his obligation to his unwanted wards for weeks now.

This fine spring morning, however, he'd finally forced himself to broach the issue while he was engaged in fencing practice at his Mayfair mansion with his two closest friends and fellow escapees of the Marriage Mart.

"But you do see my dilemma?" Marcus asked, executing a swift parry against his equally skilled opponent, Andrew Moncrief, Duke of Arden.

"Ah, yes," Drew answered above the clang of blades. "You hope to marry off your three wards, but you expect to find few takers, given the scandal in their family."

"Precisely." Marcus flashed an engaging grin. "I don't suppose you would volunteer to offer for one of them?"

The duke shot him an eloquent glance as he leapt back to evade a deft thrust. "As much as I yearn to help you, old sport, I cherish my liberty too much to make such a devastating sacrifice, even for you."

"Stubble it, Marcus." The amused drawl came from the sidelines of the salon that Marcus used as a fencing hall. Heath Griffin, Marquess of Claybourne, lounged on a settee as he awaited his turn at practice, drawing idle patterns in the air with his foil. "You're touched in the head if you think to persuade us to offer for your wards."

"They are reputed to be great beauties," Marcus coaxed.

Heath laughed outright. "And spinsters, every one of them. How old is the eldest Miss Loring? Four and twenty?"

"Not quite that."

"But she is said to be a spitfire."

"So I'm told," Marcus reluctantly acknowledged. His solicitors had described Arabella Loring as charming but fiercely stubborn-minded in her desire for emancipation from his guardianship.

"You haven't met her yet?" Heath asked.

"No, I've managed to avoid her thus far. The Misses Loring were away from home when I called to pay my condolences on the death of their step-uncle three months ago. And since then, I've let my solicitors handle all succeeding correspondence. But I will have to deal with them eventually." He sighed. "I will likely travel to Chiswick next week."

The Danvers estate was in the countryside near the small village of Chiswick, some half dozen miles west of London's fashionable Mayfair district where many of the wealthy aristocracy resided. The distance was an easy drive in a fast curricle, yet Marcus was under no illusions that his task could be dispatched quickly.

"From everything I hear," Drew said as he steadily advanced, "your wards will indeed prove a handful. It won't be easy to marry them off, particularly the eldest."

Nodding, Marcus gave a wry grimace. "Certainly not when they profess to be so adamantly opposed to marriage. I've offered to provide them significant dowries to induce respectable suitors to wed them, but they rejected my proposition out of hand."

"Harbor bluestocking notions of independence, do they?"

"So it would seem. A pity I can't convince either of you to come to my rescue."

It would have been a neat solution to his dilemma, Marcus reflected as he fought off Drew's determined offensive. In addition to inheriting the title of earl to add to his long-held barony,

he'd been encumbered with the entailed and impoverished Danvers estate, as well as responsibility for its genteel dependents, three indigent sisters. All three were blessed with impeccable lineage, superb breeding, and enviable beauty, but all were unmarried and getting somewhat long in the tooth.

Their single state was due less to their lack of fortune than to the horrendous scandal in their family. Four years ago, their mother had run off to the Continent with her French lover. Then barely a fortnight later, their father had been killed in a duel over his latest mistress—which had put an abrupt end to any last gasp chances the daughters had of marrying well.

Resolving to give his unwanted wards into more willing hands, Marcus had thought to marry them off by providing them with immense dowries. But that was before he'd discovered how fiercely independent the three beauties were. The eldest sister's letters had become downright impassioned in her appeals for self-rule.

"They are legally my wards until they turn twenty-five," Marcus explained, "but the eldest, Arabella, is already fretting over the constraints. In the past month, she has written me four letters proclaiming that she and her sisters have no need of a guardian at their advanced ages. Regrettably for us all, I am bound by the terms of the will."

Pausing to circle his opponent, Marcus ran a hand roughly through his raven hair. "Truthfully," he muttered, "it would have suited me better had I never heard of the Loring sisters. I never wished for the additional title. I was perfectly content as a baron."

His friends offered him sympathetic but amused looks, which prompted Marcus to add pointedly, "I expect your help in solving my dilemma, you spineless reprobates. Surely you can think of some appropriate candidates I can throw their way."

"You could always offer for one of them yourself," Heath suggested, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"God forbid." Marcus paused to shudder and was nearly skewered when Drew lunged with his foil.

Through much of their boyhood and all of their adulthood, the three of them—Marcus, Drew, and Heath—had been inseparable, having attended Eton and Oxford together and then come into their vast fortunes and illustrious titles the same year. And after being chased relentlessly by marriage-minded debutantes and barely eluding the traps of countless matchmaking mamas, all three shared grave reservations about the institution of matrimony. Most particularly the sort of cold, convenient union typical of the aristocracy.

Marcus had never encountered even one woman he might want to take for his wife. The thought of being shackled for life to a female he scarcely liked, much less loved, sent chills down his spine. Yet he owed it to his titles, both the new and the old, to carry on his bloodlines, so eventually he would have to marry.

The demise of his bachelorhood, however, would be a long time in coming, Marcus vowed.

Realizing his concentration had been shattered by all this unpalatable talk of matrimony, he stepped back and offered Drew a sardonic salute. "I had best withdraw before you slice me to ribbons, your grace. Heath, pray take your turn at practice."

When the marquess replaced him on the floor, Marcus crossed the salon to a side table, where he set down his rapier and retrieved a towel to wipe his damp brow.

The clash of steel had just resumed when he heard a commotion out in the corridor, coming from the vicinity of his entrance hall. He could only make out every third word or so, but it was clear he had a female caller... and that his butler was denying his presence.

His curiosity piqued, Marcus moved closer to the salon door, the better to hear.

"I repeat, Lord Danvers is not at home, miss."

"Not at home or not receiving callers?" the female voice asked pleasantly. "I have come a long distance in order to speak with him. I am willing to search the premises if I must." Her voice was low and melodious but definitely determined. "Where may I find him?"

There followed sounds of a scuffle. Apparently Hobbs was attempting to prevent her from entering the house but losing the battle. A moment later his august servant actually yelled. "Madam, you cannot go abovestairs!"

Picturing the butler blocking the foot of the mansion's sweeping staircase, Marcus found himself stifling a grin.

"Why not?" she queried. "Will I find his lordship abed or in a state of undress?"

Hobbs let out a shocked exclamation before muttering, "Very well, if you insist. I will inquire if his lordship is receiving."

"Pray, don't trouble yourself. Just tell me where he is, and I will announce myself." The dulcet voice paused. "Never mind. I hear swordplay, so I expect I need only follow the sounds."

Marcus braced himself as light footsteps approached along the corridor.

The woman who appeared in the doorway a moment later was striking in her loveliness. Although her tall, elegant figure was gowned modestly in a blue crepe carriage dress, she possessed an unmistakable confidence, a graceful presence, that compelled attention.

A beauty of substance, Marcus realized at once, captivated by the sight.

Despite her unusual height and slenderness, she was curvaceous enough to entice even a man of his jaded experience. Her pale red-gold hair was swept up beneath a bonnet, with curling tendrils spilling around her finely-boned face. He was mainly aware, however, of the pair of keen gray eyes surveying the room, the most intriguing he had ever seen. They were the hue of silver smoke and held an intelligence and warmth that instantly stirred his senses.

Her jaw was set with determination, yet when she spied him, she suddenly faltered. A slight blush rose to her cheeks, as if she realized the impropriety of barging in on three noblemen engaged in a fencing match, all dressed in shirtsleeves and breeches and boots, with no cravats or waistcoats or coats.

Her eyes traveled from Marcus's bare throat to his linen shirt that hung partway open, exposing his chest. Then abruptly, she jerked her gaze back up to his face, as if knowing she'd been caught in a forbidden scrutiny. When he locked glances with her, the color mounted in her cheeks.

Marcus found himself enchanted.

An instant later she appeared to gather her wits and forged ahead with her mission. "Which of you gentlemen is Lord Danvers?" she asked sweetly.

He took a polite step toward her. "At your service, Miss...?"

A vexed Hobbs answered behind her, "Miss Arabella Loring to see you, my lord."

"I take it you are my eldest ward," Marcus observed, concealing his amusement.

Her lovely mouth tightened the slightest measure, but then she tendered him a charming smile. "Regrettably, yes, I am your ward."

"Hobbs, take Miss Loring's pelisse and bonnet—"

"Thank you, my lord, but I don't intend to stay long. I only desire a brief interview... in private, if I may."

By now his two friends had paused in their fencing match and were watching his unexpected visitor with avid curiosity. When she advanced into the room, Marcus saw Drew raise a quizzical eyebrow, expressing surprise at her stunning appearance.

Marcus was highly surprised himself. Based on his solicitor's comments, he had expected his eldest ward to be something of a shrew, but the reports of her beauty didn't do her justice. She was, to put it simply, magnificent.

He gave Drew and Heath an apologetic glance. "Would you excuse us?"

Both noblemen crossed the salon with their rapiers, and Heath flashed Marcus a slow grin as he passed, along with one of his habitually baiting remarks. "We will await you in the hall should you need defending."

He saw Arabella stiffen at the quip, but then she laughed, a low melodious sound that once more fired his senses. "I promise not to do him bodily harm."

*A pity*, was Marcus's first thought; he might have appreciated seeing what she could do to his body.

When they were alone, however, Marcus fixed his ward with a level gaze. He admired her boldness in coming here but knew he should make some show of disapproval if he intended to keep the upper hand with her. "My solicitors warned me about your determination, Miss Loring, but I didn't expect you to flout propriety by visiting me at my home."

She gave a shrug of her elegant shoulders. "You left me little choice, my lord, since you refused to reply to my letters. We have an important matter to discuss."

"I agree, we need to settle the issue of your and your sisters' futures."

Her hesitation was followed by another proffered smile. "I am certain you are a man of reason, Lord Danvers...."

Marcus's eyebrow shot up at her obvious attempt to charm him. She was undoubtedly accustomed to twisting men around her fingers, and he felt the effect down to his loins—an effect he instinctively resisted. "Oh, I am quite reasonable ordinarily."

"Then you will understand our reluctance to acknowledge you as our guardian. I know you mean well, but we don't require your assistance."

"Certainly I mean well," he said affably. "You and your sisters are now my responsibility."

A flash of impatience showed in her gray eyes. "Which is patently absurd. We are all past the usual legal age of dependency. Most guardianships end at twenty-one. And we have no fortune to supervise, so there can be no financial justification for your management."

"No," Marcus concurred. "Your step-uncle left you without a penny to your names."

Taking a deep breath, she made an obvious effort at civility. "We don't desire your charity, my lord."

"It is not charity, Miss Loring. It's my legal obligation. You are three vulnerable females in need of man's protection."

"We do not need protecting," she replied emphatically.

"No?" Marcus gave her a penetrating look. "My solicitors are of the opinion that someone ought to take you and your sisters in hand."

Her eyes kindled. "Is that so? Well, I hardly think you are qualified to 'take us in hand,' as you term it. You have no experience playing guardian."

Marcus was pleased to be able to refute her statement. "On the contrary, I have a good deal of experience. I've been my sister's guardian for the past ten years. She is twenty-one now, the same age as your youngest sister, Lilian—who is an unruly hoyden, I'm told."

That made Arabella pause. "Perhaps that's true, but Lily was at an impressionable age when our mother deserted us."

"What of your sister Roslyn? By all reports, her uncommon beauty has made her the target for any number of rakes and scoundrels. I suspect she could benefit from a guardian's protection."

"Roslyn can take care of herself. We all can. We have since we were very young."

"But what sort of future can you expect?" Marcus countered. "Your chances for good marriages were ruined when your parents chose to create their last blatant scandal."

He saw the pain that claimed Arabella's features for a fleeting moment before she forced another smile. "How well I know," she murmured. "But even so, it is not your affair."

Marcus shook his head. "I understand why you resent me, Miss Loring, a perfect stranger taking control of your home—"

"I don't begrudge you the title or estate. What I do resent is your callous assumption that we wish to marry."

That made him smile. "It is hardly callous to offer to find husbands for you. The usual path for young ladies of quality is marriage. You act as if I've gravely offended you."

By now Arabella was clearly biting her tongue. "Forgive me if I gave you that impression, my lord. I know you don't mean it as an insult—"

"You cannot be foolish enough to turn down five thousand pounds each."

"Actually I can—" Suddenly she broke off and gave a rueful laugh. The husky, sultry sound raked his nerves endings with pleasure. "No, I won't allow you to provoke me, my lord. I came here this morning determined to be pleasant."

Marcus found himself staring at her ripe, tempting mouth before he shook himself. Arabella was speaking again, he realized.

"Perhaps you see our decision as inexplicable, Lord Danvers, but my sisters and I do not choose to marry."

"Why not?" When she failed to answer, Marcus hazarded a guess. "I suppose it has to do with the example your parents set."

"It does," Arabella admitted grudgingly. "Our parents were determined to make each other's lives miserable and fought at every opportunity. After the acrimony we witnessed growing up, is it any wonder we have an aversion to arranged marriages?"

Marcus felt more than a measure of sympathy. "I'm familiar with the sentiment. My own parents were scarcely any more congenial."

At his softer tone, she searched his face for a long moment. But then she dragged her gaze away to focus on a pool of sunlight streaming through the nearest window. "In any case, we have no need to marry. We have sufficient incomes now to support ourselves."

"Incomes?"

"If you had troubled yourself to read my letters, you would know about our academy."

"I did read your letters."

She glanced pointedly at him. "But you were not courteous enough to respond. You merely instructed your solicitors to deal with me."

"Guilty as charged. But to my credit, I intended to call upon you next week."

When he smiled winningly, Arabella drew a sharp breath. After a moment, she took another tack. "Come now, Lord Danvers. You don't want responsibility for us, admit it."

Marcus couldn't bring himself to lie. "Very well, it's true, I don't want it."

"Then why don't you simply forget about us?"

"I doubt anyone who has ever met you," Marcus said dryly, "could simply forget you, Miss Loring." When she gave him a piercing look, he sighed. "You are my responsibility now, whether

either of us likes it, and I won't abandon my duty to see to your welfare. You'll find I'm not such an ogre. And I'm wealthy enough to fund your dowries."

That made her chin lift. "I tell you, we won't accept your charity. Our academy allows us adequate financial independence."

Admittedly, learning of her academy had roused Marcus's curiosity. "I understand this academy of yours is a finishing school?"

"Of a sort. We teach comportment and manners and correct speech to wealthy young women who were not born to the Quality."

"The daughters of the working class, in other words. How very unique you are, Miss Loring."

Her gaze narrowed. "You are making sport of me."

"Perhaps." Actually he wasn't. He truly thought it admirable that Arabella and her sisters had found an occupation to support themselves, unlike almost every other lady of their station, who wouldn't be caught dead employed in menial labor. But he couldn't help wanting to provoke her, if only for the pleasure of seeing those beautiful gray eyes kindle again.

"And your sisters teach there as well?" Marcus asked leadingly.

"Yes, as do two other ladies who are friends of mine. Our patroness is Lady Freemantle. It was at her request that we opened the school three years ago. Are you acquainted with her? Her late husband was a baronet, Sir Rupert Freemantle."

Marcus nodded. "I know her. But I'm not certain it is fitting for my wards to be employed at a school, no matter how refined. You realize that as your guardian, I will have to approve your participation?"

Arabella eyed him warily. "I assure you, it is a perfectly respectable endeavor."

"Some would call your opinions bluestocking nonsense."

It was very bad of him to goad her like that, but the pleasure of seeing her spirited reaction was too great to resist.

She seemed, however, to recognize his purpose. "You won't provoke me into losing my temper, my lord."

"No?"

When he took a step closer, she froze, staring up at him as if she found him fascinating. But then she straightened her spine and stood her ground, her gaze direct and challenging. Marcus had the sudden savage urge to sweep her up in his arms and carry her to the nearest bed.

He'd never had such a primal reaction to a woman before—bloody inappropriate, considering that she was his ward.

Arabella drew a slower breath, clearly striving for equanimity, as he was. "I don't believe your mental acumen is impaired, my lord. Why is it so difficult for you to accept that we don't wish

to be under your thumb? That we don't want your financial assistance? You are under no obligation to support us."

"The will says differently."

"Then I will hire my own solicitors to contest the will."

"How can you afford it? You don't have the wherewithal to contest my guardianship in court."

"Our patroness will help us. Lady Freemantle does not believe that women should be compelled to marry, and she has promised us her support. She is not as wealthy as you, of course, but her father left her a fortune from his manufacturing and mining enterprises."

"It should prove an interesting contest," Marcus said amiably, crossing his arms over his chest.

His languid smile finally succeeded in igniting her temper. "You cannot force us to accept your settlements!"

"No, I suppose not. But once the size of your dowries becomes known, you will have suitors throwing themselves at your feet and hounding my door to offer for you."

Her gloved fists clenched as she advanced toward him, her eyes flashing dangerously. "You won't succeed in selling us, your lordship! It is outrageous that grown women are treated as mere property, no better than livestock. We are not broodmares to be hawked to the highest bidder!"

Judging by her impassioned speech, he had struck a nerve. There was fire in her eyes—a fire that filled him with admiration and attraction.

"It seems true after all," he murmured, totally intrigued by the way Arabella was glaring daggers at him.

"*What* is true?"

"That eyes can actually give off sparks. Yours are bright as fireworks."

It was that provocative remark that drove her temper over the edge. The growling sound she made deep in her throat was that of a taunted lioness—a low, dangerous rumble. "I have tried my utmost to remain patient," she began. Marching past him to the table, Arabella swept up his rapier and returned to face him, bringing the tip directly against his chest.

"I was determined to use reason to convince you, and if that failed, I hoped to prevail on your better nature. Evidently you don't have one!"

Utterly fascinated now, Marcus raised his hands slowly in surrender. "I make it a point never to argue with an armed female."

"Good! Then you will promise me that you will abandon this ridiculous notion of marrying us off."

"I fear I can't make any such promise under duress, sweeting."

"You can and you will!"

"No." Despite his fascination, he was not about to be threatened into doing anyone's bidding. But then his gaze fixed on Arabella's face... the smooth ivory texture of her skin, her ripe mouth.... He was struck with the fiercest urge to kiss her, which was astonishing, since he was not ordinarily a rash man. "Go ahead, do your worst, love."

Clenching her teeth, radiating frustration, she raised the point of the foil to the vulnerable hollow of his throat, but there she stopped.

It was a stand-off, one Marcus was not prepared to endure much longer. When she continued to hesitate, his fingers closed around her gloved ones and slowly, inexorably pushed the tip away from his throat.

Although the immediate danger was over, he kept possession of her hand, shackling her wrist as he stepped closer. His gaze dropped again to the tempting line of her lips.

Her beautiful face was turned up to his, near enough for him to feel the caress of her breath, and when she nervously moistened her lips, he fought the fierce desire to capture them with his own.

Despite the warning voice shouting in his head, Marcus found himself drawing Arabella even nearer, pulling her against him, until their bodies brushed. The feeling that sparked between them when he felt the sweet press of her breasts was hot enough to singe him.

Her eyes flared then with a different emotion, while his senses avidly relayed the excitement of touching her.

She felt warm and intensely vital. Intensely alive. Her feminine softness raised every primal male instinct he possessed.

It was all he could do to keep control of himself. "The next time you threaten a man, Miss Loring," he advised in a voice that was suddenly husky, "make certain you are prepared to carry it through."

With another small cry of frustration, she snatched her hand from his grasp and stepped back. "I will take note next time, your lordship."

Marcus was startled by how badly he wanted there to be a next time. He watched as Arabella tossed down the rapier, where it clattered on the floor.

"You should be glad I am too much of a lady to run you through," she declared. With that she spun on her heel and stalked to the door. But then she paused to shoot a darkling glance over her shoulder. "If you want a battle, Lord Danvers, I promise I will give you one."

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