

TO SEDUCE A BRIDE

EXCERPT - CHAPTER ONE

Lady Freemantle's matchmaking is vexing enough to drive a saint mad, and you know I am no saint.

— Miss Lily Loring to Fanny Irwin

Chiswick, England June 1817

Lily stared back at Lord Claybourne, vexed and tongue-tied.

The marquess was tall and powerfully built, with an air of breathtaking virility that commanded attention. His hair was a tawny brown, his eyes a gold-flecked hazel, and he had an utterly masculine face that made countless feminine hearts flutter.

Lily discovered that she was no different. Deplorably aware of her quickening pulse and heightened senses, she stood there feeling awkward and fuming at Winifred's machinations. It was mortifying, being paraded before the very wealthy, very eligible marquess like a heifer at a fair.

She remained mute as she accepted Lord Claybourne's hand and let him lead her onto the ballroom floor. And when the orchestra struck up the opening bars of a waltz, she reluctantly moved into his arms. She did *not* like being so close to him, to his heat and vitality. Nor was she pleased at how conscious she was of his body, of his natural grace, his easy sensuality as he guided her to the lilting rhythm of the music. She had never noticed such things about a man before—

"Do you dislike dancing in general, Miss Loring?" Claybourne finally asked to break the silence between them. "Or do you object to dancing with me in particular?"

Lily was taken aback by his perceptiveness. "Why would you think I object, my lord?" she hedged.

"Perhaps because of that fiercesome scowl you are wearing."

Feeling a fresh flush tinge her cheeks, she forced a polite smile. "I beg your pardon. Dancing is not my favorite pastime."

Those jeweled eyes glinted down from beneath heavy brows. "You do it quite well. I confess that surprises me."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why should it surprise you?"

"Because Marcus claims you are a spitfire and a hellion. I understand you would rather enjoy a good gallop across a field than be caught dead in a ballroom."

That honest observation won a reluctant laugh from Lily. "Most decidedly I prefer riding to waltzing, my lord, although 'spitfire' is a bit harsh. Marcus thinks I am one because I frequently quarreled with him about Arabella when he was courting her. But I am fairly even-tempered. However, I freely admit to being a hoyden—except when I play teacher at our academy and must set a good example. Or upon occasions such as this, when I'm required to endure the

social niceties for my sisters' sakes. In truth, I find a certain pleasure in defying the dictates of the ton."

"I can admire a rebel," he said, his tone edged with amusement. "You are very different from your sisters, are you not?"

His observation earned a sharp look from Lily. She regarded Claybourne suspiciously, unable to tell if he considered the difference favorable or not.

Not that she minded if his judgement of her was unfavorable. Nor did it bother her that she always fell short in comparisons with her sisters. Both Arabella and Roslyn were remarkable beauties with fair hair, creamy complexions, and tall, elegant figures.

Lily couldn't match their height or aristocratic bearing—in addition to having dark hair and eyes and a rosy coloring that made her seem a changeling in her blonde, blue-eyed family. Moreover, her sisters were the epitome of grace and ladylike gentility, while her own high spirits and stubborn aversion to conforming to the absurdly stuffy precepts of the ruling elite regularly led her into trouble.

But Lily had no intention of apologizing to his lordship for her subversive tendencies. Indeed, to her mind, the less conversation she had with him the better.

He, however, did not appear inclined to take her hint and keep silent. "Did you enjoy the wedding ceremony this morning, Miss Loring?"

That topic was an extreme sore point with her also, although she managed to hide her wince. "Arabella made a beautiful bride," she said carefully.

"But you don't approve of your sister marrying my friend."

Lily's frown returned as she scanned the ballroom for the bridal couple and found Arabella and Marcus laughing together as they waltzed. "I fear she may be making a mistake, wedding so suddenly. They have known each other for barely two months."

"And yet they profess to be madly in love."

"I know," Lily said morosely. Watching the tender looks Belle and Marcus shared as they glided together in the dance, she had to admit they seemed very much in love. "But I worry that it won't last."

Claybourne smiled. "You sound very much like my friend Arden."

Arden, Lily knew, was Marcus's other close friend, Drew Moncrief, the Duke of Arden. The three noblemen—Danvers, Arden, and Claybourne—were as thick as thieves. "His grace did not want them to marry, either?"

"Not at all, and for your same reasons."

"What about you, my lord? What is your opinion of their union?"

Claybourne's eyes glimmered with amusement. "I am reserving judgement for the time being, but I'm inclined to approve. They look remarkably happy now, don't you agree?"

"Yes. And I truly hope it continues. I don't want Arabella to be hurt."

That seemed to catch his attention. "And you think Marcus will hurt your sister?"

"That is what noblemen tend to do," Lily muttered under her breath, although his lordship evidently heard.

His gaze turned curious. "Not all noblemen are villains, Miss Loring."

"No... in all fairness, they are not."

At his mention of villains, she studied the marquess measuringly. He was a powerfully-built man, broad-chested and muscular. The top of her head barely came to his shoulder.

She tended to measure a man by how they treated women, a habit ingrained in her when she was a girl. Surprisingly Lord Claybourne didn't make her physically wary. At least not for the usual reasons—because he was bigger and stronger than she.

He looked very strong, yet he didn't seem to be the kind of man who would use his strength against someone weaker.

Perhaps it was his easy smile. Or perhaps it was because of the tales she'd heard of him. The Marquess of Claybourne was legendary for the way women adored him.

He was said to adore women in turn, just not enough to marry any one of his numerous conquests. Which made it surprising that he didn't object to his friend Marcus's unexpected marriage.

"I trust you don't mean to condemn me out of hand," Claybourne observed, interrupting her intent perusal. "At least not until we are better acquainted."

Lily clamped down on her wayward thoughts. "There is no need for us to become better acquainted, my lord," she said lightly. "We don't move in the same circles, and as soon as the wedding celebrations are over, I plan to resume being a hoyden and never set foot in another ballroom except under pain of death."

His laugh was husky and charming—and quite disarming. "Marcus warned me you were unique."

Lily had a mutinous desire to resist that effortless charm. Tearing her gaze away from his amused one, she focused on a distant point over his shoulder.

She didn't want to admit her attraction to Lord Claybourne. He made her feel delicate and fragile and feminine—and she didn't care for the sensations at all. Indeed, the sense of power, of vitality, about him, was overwhelming.

But oddly, his allure was due to more than his handsome features and masculine form. There was an aura about him that hinted at excitement. He looked like a bold adventurer. A traveler, an explorer. As if he should be captaining a ship, sailing the seven seas, or leading an intrepid expedition, probing the secrets of unknown lands.

Lily didn't know if he owned a ship, but she knew he was a sportsman. The stories of Claybourne's sporting exploits were repeated in all the drawing rooms. And Winifred had been

singing his praises the entire day, attempting to rouse Lily's interest in targeting him for her husband.

She had absolutely no desire to marry the marquess, however, or any other man for that matter. Even though she was forced to admit that Claybourne was the most compelling man she had ever met—which was an ideal reason to keep away from him.

As soon as the waltz was over, Lily had extricated herself from his unnerving company.

She intended to leave the ball early in any case, to spend the night with her good friend Tess Blanchard, a genteel young lady who was also a teacher at the Freemantle Academy.

After saying farewell to Arabella and then drinking two more glasses of champagne in quick succession—Lily had needed the libation for fortitude and to hold back her tears of sadness—she made her way to one of the rear stable wings, formerly used for broodmares, and struggled up the ladder to the loft to feed Boots and check on her kittens. It was blessedly quiet here, set away from the rest of the yard.

Her head was still swimming from the overindulgence of wine, along with her potent memories of Lord Claybourne. The feel of him as they'd waltzed—sinewy and powerful, all lithe grace—had uncustomarily flustered her.

"But I trust I will never see him again after t'night," Lily muttered as she returned the black kitten to the box. "Or at least that I will never again be the victim of Winifred's humiliating mash... *matchmaking* schemes."

It was then that Lily heard a faint noise from below, like a throat being cleared.

Wondering who had entered the stable, she shifted her position to look over the loft's edge. Her heart skipped a violent beat when she spied the broad-shouldered Marquess of Claybourne leaning against a post, his arms folded, his head cocked to one side.

When her head suddenly started spinning dizzily, Lily drew back in haste. Oh, dear heaven. Had he overheard her lament that he was too charming? What other incriminating observations had she made about him?

Holding a hand to her throbbing temple, Lily slowly peered over the side again. "M-My lord, what are you doing here?"

"I saw you leave the ball and wondered why you would visit the stables."

"You followed me?" Lily asked blankly.

Claybourne gave a bland nod. "Guilty as charged."

Her eyes narrowed. "So you were shamelessly eavesdropping?"

"I was curious. Do you always talk to yourself, Miss Loring?"

"Sometimes. But in this case I am speaking to the cat... Actually cats. Boots the stable cat recently had kittens."

"Would you care to explain what you are doing up there in the loft?"

"If you must... must know... I am feeding her."

"You came here to feed the stable cat?" His tone held surprise and a hint of disbelief.

"Should I have let her starve?" Lily asked rhetorically. "Boots is an excellent mouser, but at the moment she has more important tasks to occupy her, namely taking care of her kittens."

His handsome mouth quirked. "Do you mean to remain there with the cats?"

"No. I will come down as soon as my head clears. I seem... to have drunk a bit too much champagne." To her chagrin, she was too dizzy just now to climb safely down the ladder to escape Lord Claybourne's unwanted presence.

"Then you won't mind if I join you," he said, moving across the isle to put a foot on the lowest wooden rung.

Yes, she minded! Lily sat up abruptly, wondering how she could prevent him from imposing his company upon her. "You cannot climb up here, my lord!" she exclaimed, yet her protest obviously had no effect, since his head soon appeared above the edge of the loft.

"I believe I can. I plan to keep you company."

With his torso in view, he paused to survey her with interest.

"You will get your coat dusty," Lily said lamely, eyeing his elegantly tailored evening coat of burgundy superfine—Weston, no doubt—that fitted those magnificent shoulders to perfection.

"My coat will survive." His gaze raked over her own attire. "What about you? You are wearing a ball gown."

"That is different. I don't care about clothing."

When his eyebrow shot up, Lily realized that her retort could have two meanings. "I d-don't mean that I like to go *naked*..." she stammered, feeling scalding heat flood her cheeks. "I only meant that I don't care about fancy clothing... ball gowns and such."

"How novel." His tone turned wry as he climbed the last few rungs and settled a hip on the loft's edge. "It strains the imagination. You must be the first female I've ever met who isn't interested in fancy gowns."

"But you see, I am not normal, my lord. I am very *abnormal*."

"Is that so?" he replied, easing himself closer to sit beside her.

Even in the dim light, she could see that his hazel eyes were dancing. He was laughing at her!

Stiffening her spine, Lily opened her mouth to remonstrate, but he spoke first. "What is so abnormal about you, angel? You look exceedingly normal to me."

When his gaze drifted downward again over her body, Lily pressed her hands to her flaming cheeks and willed herself to calm down—which was deplorably difficult considering the fluttery, flustered sensations that were racing through her at his lordship's close proximity.

Stretching up to her full sitting height, she tried to appear regal and made her tone dampening as she replied. "I *meant* that I am not usual for a female."

"I have little doubt about that."

She shot him an exasperated look. "The thing is, I should have been born male. I would have been much happier."

"Oh, and are you so unhappy now?"

In her slightly inebriated state, her thoughts were more sluggish than usual, and she had to consider his question for a moment. "Well... no. I like my life quite well. But women have little of the freedom that men enjoy."

"What freedom would you like to enjoy, love?"

Lily bit her lower lip, abashed at how her tongue was running away from her. Yet she couldn't seem to help herself; the champagne had loosened her tongue deplorably. "Never mind. Don't listen to me, my lord. I don't hold my liquor at all well."

"So it would seem. What made you drink so much then?"

"I was drowning my sorrows, if you insist on knowing."

"What sorrows?"

"At losing my sister to matrimony. I was indulging in a bout of melancholy. But it was supposed to be *private*." When he didn't respond, Lily added pointedly, "That is a veiled hint for you to leave, my lord."

Instead of retreating down the loft ladder, he smiled and leaned back, casually resting his weight on his palms and crossing his long, satin-clad legs in front of him, as if settling in for a long stay.

Lily exhaled in a huff. "I don't think you comprehend the danger you are in, Lord Claybourne. It is a grave mistake for you to be alone with me. If Winifred knew, she would be ecstatic."

"Winifred?"

"Lady Freemantle. She is the main reason I left the ball early—to escape her machinations. She is trying to match me with you. You must have noticed."

Her allegation didn't seem to alarm him as it should. "Perhaps, but her machinations are no worse than usual. I'm well-accustomed to eager mamas throwing their daughters at my head."

Lily grimaced in disgruntlement. "Perhaps you can dismiss her scheming, but I cannot. It is mortifying in the extreme. I am not a prize heifer, to be exhibited before an eligible gentleman and judged for my defects and qualifications."

His eyes were dancing again. "I should think not."

At his blithe reply, exasperation welled up in Lily full force. "Do you not understand? Winifred wants me to set my cap at you."

"But you don't intend to."

"Certainly not! I have no interest in marriage."

"That is quite a unique perspective for a young lady. Most women have made it their mission in life to find a husband."

"True. But you needn't worry about me hounding you, Lord Claybourne. Oh, I know you are a prime catch. You are disgustingly rich, you have a vaunted title, you aren't so shabby in appearance, and you are said to be irresistibly charming."

"But you aren't swayed by this delightful catalog of my attributes."

"Not in the least." Lily smiled faintly to soften the harshness of her observation. "No doubt you have a bevy of lovestruck admirers, but I will never join their ranks. And I have no intention of behaving like all the other flagrant husband-hunters you know. I won't chase after you."

"You relieve my mind, Miss Loring. I don't enjoy being chased." From the provocative laughter in his voice, he seemed to be enjoying himself far too much. "But I am quite curious to know why you have such a profound distaste for marriage."

Lily drew a deep breath. Hoyden or not, she normally would never dream of discussing her personal affairs with a perfect stranger. But in this case, she was eager to be rid of him, so a liberal dose of frankness might stand her in good stead.

"In my experience marriage usually leads to unhappiness for a woman," she said honestly.

"You speak from personal experience?"

Lily made a face. "Unfortunately, yes. My parents' union was hostile enough to give me an aversion to matrimony for life."

The gleaming light in Claybourne's eyes faded as he studied her. His searching perusal was more unsettling than his amusement, however.

"I don't need a husband," she hurried to add, "despite what proper society decrees for young ladies. I am financially independent now, thanks to the generous settlement Marcus made me. So I can have a fulfilling life without having to marry."

"Yet you implied you wanted more freedom."

She smiled uncertainly. "True." Her dream had always been to live a life of freedom and adventure. "I mean to use the funds to travel the world and explore new and exciting places."

"Alone?"

"Lady Hester Stanhope did it," Lily pointed out, mentioning the adventurous earl's daughter and niece of William Pitt the Younger who had sailed to the Middle East and eventually joined a settlement of Arab tribesmen.

"So she did. But she was significantly older than you."

"I am one and twenty, old enough to take care of myself."

"So... you won't marry because men often make their wives unhappy," Claybourne said slowly, as if testing the theory in his mind.

"Yes. First you make us too infatuated to think clearly, so we give over all control to you, and then you make our lives a misery. I am not about to give any man that power over me."

To her surprise, Claybourne leaned forward and raised a hand to touch her cheek. "Who hurt you, angel?" he asked quietly.

Discomfited, Lily drew back. "No one hurt me. It was my mother and my sister who were hurt."

He was silent for a moment. "I understand your father was a champion philanderer."

Lily looked away, not wanting to recall the painful memories. "He was indeed. He flaunted his mistresses before my mother at every opportunity. It hurt her terribly. And Arabella's first betrothed betrayed her almost as badly. Belle *loved* him, but when the scandal broke, he ended their engagement out of hand."

Lily was certain Lord Claybourne knew all about the terrible scandals that had befallen her family four years ago. First their mother had taken a lover because she was unable to endure her unhappy marriage any longer, and then was forced to flee to the Continent by her outraged husband. Then a fortnight later their libertine father gambled away the last of his fortune and was killed in a duel over one of his mistresses. The Loring sisters had been left penniless and homeless, at the mercy of their curmudgeonly step-uncle, the Earl of Danvers, who had taken them in most grudgingly.

"Is that why you didn't want Marcus marrying your sister?"

"In large part."

"You seem to harbor a strong prejudice against noblemen."

"I won't deny it. Noblemen can make the worst sort of husbands."

"Then I can take heart from the fact that your aversion is not directed at me personally."

Her brows drew together. "No, I have nothing against you *personally*, my lord. I don't even know you." Thankfully, she added to herself.

Claybourne remained silent for another dozen heartbeats before shifting his position to study the box's inhabitants. "I take it this is Boots," he murmured, reaching down to scratch the mother cat behind one ear. Surprisingly Boots didn't object but started purring at once, rubbing her head sensuously against his fingers.

Lily found her gaze riveted on his lordship's hands as he stroked the silky gray fur. He had strong, graceful hands, surprising in such a bold, masculine man.

"I think you are forgetting one important fact," he said finally.

She didn't immediately realize Lord Claybourne was speaking to her. "What fact?"

"It is true that some men can be hurtful, but they can also give women great pleasure."

Warmth rose to her face. "Perhaps some men can, but that is beside the point."

Just then the black kitten pounced on the lace of his cuff and started chewing his knuckle.

"Hungry little fellow, aren't you?" he murmured with a smile. "And you as well," he added as the gray kitten attacked his thumb.

He drew out the tiny creatures, settling them in his lap. Almost at once the black kitten crawled up his chest, digging its claws into the gold brocade of his waistcoat.

"I am sorry, my lord," Lily said regretfully.

"It is no matter." When the black one scampered higher, Claybourne gave a soft laugh. The low, husky sound raked across her nerve-endings with undeniable potency.

"Here, let me help..." she hastened to say.

Leaning forward, Lily reached out to pluck the kitten off his chest, but the curling claws clung to the priceless lace of his cravat. She tried to extricate it without damaging the fine fabric and somehow wound up pushing the marquess back in the straw.

He lay there, looking up at her. Leaning over him, Lily froze at the expression on his face. He had gone quite still, but there was a soft fire in his eyes that made her heart beat faster.

"I am sorry," she repeated, suddenly breathless.

"I am not."

His fingers closing gently around the tiny black paws, he managed to free his cravat and set the kitten in the straw beside him. Immediately it bounded off toward the box, and the gray went scrambling after its litter mate.

Even so, Lily couldn't look away from Lord Claybourne. When he reached up and slid his fingers behind her nape, her breathing faltered altogether. Then shockingly, he drew her mouth down to meet his in a featherlight contact.

She was unprepared for the rush of sensation that shot through her at that unexpected caress; his lips were warm and firm yet enticingly soft at the same time—and much too tempting.

Stifling a gasp, Lily pressed her palms against his chest and lifted her reeling head. "W-Why did you do that?" she asked, her voice suddenly hoarse.

"I wanted to see if your lips were as inviting as they look."

His reply was not what she expected. "And were they?"

"More so."

Lily stared down at him, unable to move. Her gaze was riveted on his face. It was a strong face, arresting and beautiful in the muted glow of lamplight. He had a beautiful mouth also, even though she hadn't let herself acknowledge it before. His lips were chiseled and generous, and they curved now in a faint smile as he returned her regard.

"I expect you have no idea what you are missing, sweetheart. Passion between a man and a woman can be quite remarkable."

Lily cleared her suddenly dry throat, fighting her enchanted stupor. "Even so, I don't care to have anything to do with passion."

"What do you know about it? Have you ever even been properly kissed?"

Her brow furrowed cautiously. "What do you mean by 'properly'?"

His quiet chuckle was soft, husky, as he drew her face down to his again. "If you have to ask, the answer must be no. I think we should rectify the deficiency at once...."

As the warm mist of his breath caressed her mouth, Lily braced herself for the renewed shock, but when his lips began to play over hers with exquisite pressure, she felt her resistance melting.

The effect of his kiss was spellbinding. The heady sensation he roused made her lightheaded and giddy, much like the effect of the champagne.

When he left off this time, he reached up and stroked her cheek with a finger. "Did you find that pleasurable, sweeting?"

She couldn't utter a denial for it would be a lie. His kiss had left her breathless and dazed, and she felt a strange quivering between her thighs, an restless ache low and deep in her feminine center. "Y-Yes."

"You sound unsure."

"It was... quite pleasant."

His mouth curved wryly. "Merely pleasant? I think I should be insulted."

"You know you needn't be. You are said to be a devil with the ladies, and you have countless conquests—" She paused, shaking her head in a futile effort to clear it. "At least now I can understand why everyone says women adore you."

"Who says so?"

"Fanny."

"Fanny Irwin? Ah yes, I recall your sister Arabella mentioning that you were childhood friends with Miss Irwin."

Fanny was one of the most sought-after courtesans in London. But as one of their dearest friends, she had attended Arabella's wedding celebrations today, much to the dismay of the ton's high sticklers.

Lily desperately wished Fanny were here now to advise her. How she had gotten herself into such a fix? What was she doing here in a secluded loft with this utterly beguiling stranger? Somehow she was sprawled all over Lord Claybourne, pressed against his hard, muscular body. Warmth radiated up from his chest, infusing her breasts with a delicious heaviness.

And that was before he raised a finger to the hollow of her throat and lightly stroked. "I think I should demonstrate."

"Demonstrate what?" she asked unsteadily.

His eyes smiled into hers. "The kind of pleasure a man can give a woman."

Excerpt from *To Seduce a Bride* by Nicole Jordan
Copyright © 2007 by Nicole Jordan
All rights reserved