

TO TAME A DANGEROUS LORD

EXCERPT – CHAPTER ONE

I wish you were still here to counsel me, Maman. You never warned me that a man's kiss could be so thrilling, or that a simple embrace could shatter a woman's senses. It was a most startling revelation!

Near London, September 1817

"Of all the dratted ill luck," Madeline Ellis muttered as she peered out the inn's bedchamber window at the dimly-lit stableyard below. "First the stage and now Lord Ackerby."

Her heart sank at her worsening predicament. It was vexing enough that the stagecoach carrying her to London had lost a wheel in the middle of a torrential rainstorm this afternoon, stranding her an hour short of her destination, which meant depleting her meager funds on a night's lodging at a posting inn. But now the lecherous Baron Ackerby had somehow found her trail.

Madeline had just retired for bed when she was alerted by the commotion of the baron's traveling chaise arriving in the cobbled yard of The Drake. She could see his lordship's elegantly-garbed figure below in the lamplight, could hear his imperious voice giving orders to change his team while he inquired inside.

When his gaze swept upward, Madeline ducked behind the window curtain to avoid being seen.

"This is beyond maddening," she said through gritted teeth.

For years Lord Ackerby had merely hinted at his desire to have her for his mistress, but recently his unwanted advances had become disgustingly overt, and eluding him was proving an exercise in futility.

Madeline winced at the thought of the persistent libertine finding her here. She couldn't believe Ackerby was actually licentious enough to try to ravish her to force her compliance, but even so, she was far too vulnerable in her nightdress and bare feet. Regrettably, though, she had no dressing gown with her, since her trunk was still strapped to the back of the stagecoach. And her cloak was clammy and damp from traipsing down the road in a pouring rain after the wheel mishap. She likely had no time, either, to pull on her muddy half boots. Doubtless the baron would inquire of the innkeep if a lady of her description – medium brown hair, average height, drab attire – had passed this way today. And he would be directed to her bedchamber upstairs, where the flimsy door latch would provide scant deterrent. *Heaven forbid.*

In determination Madeline squared her shoulders. With her employer's recent demise and her brother's untimely departure, she had no one to depend on but herself. *So you might*

as well take action instead of standing here frozen like a halfwit, she scolded herself. Besides, she was a soldier's daughter who had learned to be strong and self-sufficient.

"He thinks me defenseless, *Maman*, but he will discover differently," Madeline added as she searched her reticule in the darkness.

She had the admittedly eccentric habit of talking to her late French mother, seeking her unspoken counsel. Jacqueline Ellis was long in her grave, much to the grief of her husband and two children, having been carried off by a deadly ague the winter when Madeline was thirteen. It had been the saddest day of her life. But carrying on imaginary conversations with her dear departed mother made her feel as if *Maman* were still with her.

To Madeline's further sorrow, her father had been killed in the war five years later. And her only remaining family – her younger brother Gerard – had left the district this week, having secretly eloped to Scotland with his childhood sweetheart.

Madeline felt a trifle better when she located her small, single-shot pistol in her reticule. Yet she didn't relish waiting here like a helpless mouse being hunted by a bird of prey.

"And soldier's daughter or not, there is no shame in retreating when the odds are against you," Madeline reminded herself. Papa would have said it wasn't cowardly to flee under such circumstance, merely wise.

After checking that the pistol was primed and loaded, she opened her bedchamber door and peered out. The corridor was empty, she saw in the dim light of a wall sconce.

Slipping from her room, she shut the door quietly and crept down the hall, heading toward the rear of the inn. She could hear laughter and raucous masculine camaraderie from the taproom below as she rounded the corner searching for a place to hide.

To her relief, she saw an open door to what was obviously a parlor rather than a bedchamber. A welcoming fire crackled in the grate, while a low-burning lamp illuminated the near side of the room.

Hearing an ominous tread of footsteps on the staircase behind her, Madeline slipped inside the parlor and took up a defensive position behind the door.

Dismayingly, Baron Ackerby's persistence had only been emboldened three weeks ago when her longtime position as a lady's companion ended with the passing of her elderly employer, a crabby but dear noblewoman. At the moment Madeline was heading to London to seek work at an employment agency, since it was even more imperative now that she find the means to support herself. In championing the course of true love, she'd helped her brother elope to Scotland and had given him all her remaining savings.

Madeline loathed being in such a vulnerable situation, virtually penniless and at the mercy of a powerful, wealthy lord who thought he ruled everything and everyone in proximity to Chelmsford, Essex. She was convinced that Baron Ackerby wanted her chiefly because she had always resisted him. Why else would he pursue a spinster of somewhat plain

looks and outspoken wit if not for the challenge of vanquishing her?

Apparently, her stubborn defiance only roused his determination to have her for his mistress. Even so, Madeline could scarcely believe Ackerby's gall when he'd voiced his humiliating proposition outright not two hours after her employer was laid in her grave!

Madeline's bloodlines, too, were a strike against her. The French emigres in their community were generally poor and had little defense against the whims of the nobility and gentry. Madeline was only half French – her father had been a captain in the British Army and a brilliant intelligence officer serving under General Lord Wellington – but even so, she had little protection now against a lascivious nobleman bent on owning her.

Standing there in the parlor, barefoot and scantily dressed, Madeline shivered. Perhaps she should have wrapped a bed quilt around her to stave off the chill. Even holding her pistol at the ready, she felt vulnerable. She *despised* this feeling of powerlessness. She could feel her heart beating much too rapidly as she wondered what excuse the baron would have given to the innkeep for following her—

Just then the hair on the back of her neck stood up. Evidently she was mistaken about the parlor being empty, for she sensed a threatening presence behind her.

Her heart practically stopped when a man's strong fingers suddenly closed around her wrist like a manacle. Gasping, Madeline whirled to face him, but the next instant he claimed her pistol and hauled her against him. She was jolted by the impact as arms of steel clamped around her body, holding her immobile.

Stunned, she gazed up at her raven-haired captor. He was tall, powerfully built, with a sense of danger about him that was unmistakable. But it was his physical masculine beauty that took her breath away: Strong, chiseled features, winged black brows, and dark fringed blue eyes.

Eyes that were pinning her with a deadly look at the moment.

Dear heavens, Maman... what have I done? Madeline wondered before silently answering her own question.

Evidently she had jumped from the proverbial frying pan into the fire.

She swallowed hard, wondering if it would benefit her to scream.

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Rayne Kenyon, Earl of Haviland, had seen a good deal in his illustrious career with British Intelligence, but it was not every day he encountered a woman garbed only in a nightdress brandishing a pistol.

And to think he was just lamenting again how dull his life had been of late, Rayne reflected as he tightened his hold on the intruder.

He didn't take kindly to the threat of weapons when he was unarmed himself. Besides, the last female to brandish a pistol at him had been a French spy out for his blood. Therefore, when this scantily dressed interloper had barged into the private parlor where he was awaiting the arrival of a relative, his survival instincts had taken over, along with his highly trained reflexes.

But now that he'd disarmed her, a different set of impulses swiftly gained control. His senses registered the lush warmth of her body, the sweet scent of her skin, the luminous shock in her wide gray eyes.

Bloody hell, Rayne thought wryly, clamping down on his urges. It was damned foolish to be lusting after a strange female who might be bent on assassination. Although it was unlikely anyone wanted to kill him just now. His days as a spymaster were long over.

And she looked startled enough that he doubted his assassination was her chief aim.

"I b-beg your pardon," she stammered, her voice shaken and breathless. "I d-didn't realize this parlor was occupied."

He relaxed his hold a measure, although he kept one arm around her waist while he examined her pistol.

When he saw her eying the weapon longingly, Rayne shook his head and lowered the pistol to his side. "I'll keep this, if you please."

"I would not have used it on *you*."

"Then why were you carrying it?"

She went rigid upon hearing footsteps out in the corridor. "Please," she whispered urgently, peering over her shoulder toward the door. "Don't give me away."

She was clearly concerned about whomever was out in the corridor.

"I hope you will forgive me," she added suddenly, turning back to him, "if I ask you to kiss me." Then wrapping her arms around his neck, she lifted her face and plastered her mouth to his.

In his dozen years working for the Crown, Rayne had rarely been caught so off guard. But the press of her full lips against his was an utter surprise, one that sent a jolt of pure pleasure rocketing through him.

Her mouth was ripe and warm, as was her body, so once more he reacted on sheer instinct: He returned her kiss with an involuntary hunger.

Her taste was keenly arousing and unexpectedly sweet. Without thought, Rayne increased the pleasure by parting her lips with his thrusting tongue.

At first she stiffened in response, as if startled herself by the novelty of his action. Yet she opened to his exploration, perhaps because she was too stunned to do otherwise.

He might have gone on kissing her for some time if not for the gruff male voice intruding on the intimate moment.

"What the devil is the meaning of this!"

To Rayne's regret, the woman in his arms gave a jerk and pulled her mouth away. She was flushed and trembling when she turned to face the newcomer, but under the circumstances her poise was admirable when she said coolly, "Lord Ackerby, what brings you here?"

She obviously knew the tall, auburn-haired gentleman who was pinning her with an intense stare.

"Why, you, of course, Madeline. I heard that you had left Chelmsford to look for employment, so I thought to convey you to London myself."

"That is kind of you, my lord, but I have no need of your assistance."

"Certainly you do. You currently have no income, and no means of transportation."

Her chin raised at a slight angle of defiance. "I can manage on my own. And as you see, I am busy at the moment. I should think even you would realize it is ragmannered to interrupt a tryst."

The nobleman looked taken aback before his eyes narrowed with skepticism. "You intend me to believe you came here to meet your lover?"

"You may believe what you choose, my lord," she replied sweetly.

It had taken Rayne little time to realize she was pretending a liaison with him in order to thwart her pursuer. Deciding to go along with the charade for the moment and play the part of her lover, he tightened his arm around her waist possessively and drew her closer to him.

"Ackerby, is it? You should heed the lady's wishes. She has no desire for your company."

His face darkening, the nobleman swung his gaze to Rayne. "Just who the devil are you?"

"I am Haviland."

"The Earl of Haviland?" the man asked in apparent recognition.

"Yes."

Rayne's illustrious title gave Ackerby pause. Evidently it was one thing to pursue a

defenseless, unemployed woman. It was quite another to challenge a wealthy earl who could clearly take care of himself and her as well.

"You have no business interfering, sir," Ackerby finally retorted.

"But he does," Madeline countered smoothly. "It is *you* who have no claim to me, my lord."

Ackerby's tone turned conciliatory. "I traveled a great distance on your account, Madeline. I am concerned for your welfare."

"Indeed?" Her tone had gone dry. "I hardly think my welfare was your chief motive in following me. But I have told you numerous times, I am not interested in your proposition. Now perhaps you understand why. I already have a protector."

She was more than holding her own, Rayne observed, yet he thought it time to intervene. "I suggest you take your leave, Ackerby, before I am compelled to assist you."

The nobleman was clearly disbelieving about being dismissed – and furious as well. His gaze skewered first Rayne, then the woman.

"You have not heard the last from me," Ackerby warned her before spinning on his heel and stalking out.

She had been holding her breath, but after a long moment, she shuddered in relief.

"Thank you for not giving me away," she murmured, turning her head to gaze up at Rayne. "Truly, I did not mean to trouble you."

"It was no trouble," he replied lightly. "I daresay it flattered my vanity to play your paramour."

Her cheeks warmed to a becoming pink. "I do not usually kiss perfect strangers – or anyone else for that matter." Her attention shifted to the weapon he still held at his side. "May I have my pistol back, please?"

"It depends on how you mean to use it. You'll understand my discomfort at the threat you presented when you suddenly appeared."

Her mouth quirked. "You were never in any real danger from me. I only armed myself in case he tried to accost me. Baron Ackerby has... less than honorable designs upon my person."

"So I deduced," Rayne said. "Would you have shot him?"

"I don't imagine so, but I thought it better to be prepared."

"I take it he offered you a position in his bed and you refused?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Certainly I refused. I won't be any man's mistress. Particularly one whose arrogant manner drives me half mad. His conceit will not permit him to accept my refusal. But obviously I underestimated him. I did not expect him to follow me to London." She glanced worriedly at the door again. "I believe I will wait here for a while longer, if you don't mind the intrusion."

"Not in the least, but I should think you would dislike being alone with a stranger."

That brought her considering gaze back to Rayne. "I will take my chances with you. You appear to be a gentleman."

Rayne returned her regard while drawing his own conclusions about her. She was well spoken, a lady by the sound of it. Her bearing, too, suggested gentility.

He understood why the baron would want her in his bed. She was not a beauty; in truth, she was rather plain, with square, somewhat masculine features and a sallow complexion. And her hair was a mousy, nondescript brown, which she wore scraped back from her face in a serviceable plait. But her body was another matter altogether. He'd felt her ripe curves hidden by the folds of her practical, unflattering nightdress.

She was a lush armful that he found extremely appealing—

"You may release me now," she said rather breathlessly, interrupting Rayne's lustful thoughts and reminding him that his arm was still draped around her waist.

Strangely he didn't want to let her go, although he did so. "At least tell me your full name." When she hesitated, he added, "I should like to know whom I rescued."

Her mouth curved. "You did not *rescue* me precisely. I believe I can claim the larger credit."

"I see. You're ungrateful now that the danger has passed."

Amusement flashed in her expressive gray eyes, and Rayne found himself unaccountably intrigued. Since Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo two years ago, his days of excitement and danger were over, much to his regret. The need for spies to thwart a French tyrant bent on world domination was a relic of the past. And even though Rayne had stretched out his career as long as possible, through the Congress of Vienna when the triumphant powers had divided up Europe and redistributed Boney's territorial claims, he'd been forced to return to England the previous year when he inherited the earldom at his father's passing.

He was utterly bored by the tameness of his current life and the necessity of hunting for a bride. He'd spent the past interminable week at a house party in Brighton as a favor to his grandmother, the dowager Countess Haviland. He'd accompanied Lady Haviland there and intended to escort her back to London at the conclusion, but it had been a relief to escape early because of a desperate summons by his distant cousin, Freddie Lunsford. Rayne was awaiting Freddie now, but this particular lady was also proving a welcome

respite.

He had no excuse for not returning her pistol, though. When he handed the weapon to her, she stepped back from him with an expression of relief. "Thank you. I won't inconvenience you further, Lord Haviland."

"You needn't go just yet," Rayne said, laying a hand on her arm when she started to turn away. "A bouncer like Ackerby may still be waiting to pounce on you."

"He has left the inn by now... I hope." She didn't sound convinced, however. Putting her arms around her thinly-clad form, she shivered.

"You are chilled," he noted. "Come stand by the fire."

Apparently she recognized the wisdom of his suggestion, for after another moment's hesitation, she nodded.

Taking her elbow, Rayne guided her into the parlor toward the hearth. On the way, he collected his caped greatcoat, which he'd laid over the end of the sofa, and draped it around her shoulders.

"Thank you," Madeline murmured once more, snuggling into the depths of the fabric and then holding out her hands to the blaze.

When his greatcoat began to slip, Rayne caught it and moved to stand in front of her. Reaching up, he started to close the lapels across her bosom. But then she looked up at him and his altruistic gesture arrested.

The firelight lent a golden glow to her skin and brought out the shining, honey-bright highlights of her hair, Rayne saw. But it was her mouth that most attracted his attention. Red and ripe, it beckoned to him.

Rayne went utterly still, recognizing the primitive sensations streaking through him: Possessiveness, hunger, lust. Sexual awareness was suddenly rife between them.

She felt it also, he knew. The tension in her body had returned with a new, sharp-edged tautness he could actually sense.

Madeline shivered again, but not with cold, he suspected. When her lips parted in a wordless inhalation, Rayne couldn't resist, despite his assertions of being a gentleman.

He lowered his head to claim another kiss from her.

She gave a faint gasp at the first potent contact of their mouths, while his own breath quickened at the enticing taste and feel of her. Her lips trembled under his... soft, resilient, lush, the texture of silk, although she seemed too stunned to participate in her seduction.

Therefore, he changed the slant of his mouth and took her mouth more thoroughly,

insistently coaxing her surrender.

He felt a measure of triumph when her tongue met his almost willingly this time. Raising a hand to cradle her jaw, Rayne angled his head even further and deepened the pressure, the better to drink her in.

Her breath softened to a sigh as their tongues tangled, mated. The tantalizing promise of her response stirred heat and need in Rayne's loins. It didn't help either to know she was naked beneath her nightdress. He could feel his hunger rise the longer he went on kissing her. He felt primed and more than ready to strip off her nightdress and explore the ripe curves of her oh-so-feminine body.

Hearing a warning voice clamoring in his head, Rayne fought the urge to pull her closer. Even so, his hand shifted to her throat, caressing the fine skin above her nightshift's high neckline. He found her pulse thrumming wildly, and when she moaned, the soft sound only sharpened his desire. His greatest longing just now was to cup her full breasts and kindle her pleasure even further, but he wouldn't permit himself to go so far. Instead he allowed his imagination to flourish.

He could picture himself baring the luscious mounds of her breasts. Savoring her taste when he sucked her peaked nipples into his mouth. Stroking his hands down her back to her rounded buttocks. Raising the hem of her nightdress and sliding his fingers between her parted thighs.

She would be hot and wet and ready for him, he knew.

A fierce shaft of need arrowed through Rayne as he envisaged lifting her up and plunging into her welcoming heat, locking her legs around his hips as he took her.

He settled instead for embracing her while claiming her mouth, all of his senses focused on the vibrant woman in his arms. Like him, she had become lost in the powerful sensuality flowing between them.

Of her own accord, she moved closer, pressing her breasts flush against his chest, her belly tight against his erection. When she arched against Rayne, his hands went to her hips, holding her supple figure even tighter, molding her softness to his much harder frame. He wanted to seize her, to ravish her, to sink into her—

At last acknowledging the danger of losing his control, Rayne determinedly shackled his need and forced himself to stop. Breaking off his passionate embrace, he lifted his head. Her eyes were closed, he saw, and when he eased back, Madeline swayed weakly.

He caught her shoulders to support her, and her eyes fluttered open. She looked dazed, shaken even.

Staring up at him, she raised her fingers to her lips, as if feeling the burn there. "W-why did you kiss me again?" she whispered, her voice a mere hoarse thread.

He gazed down at her, admiring the alluring picture she made – her cheeks flushed, her lovely eyes wide with shocked arousal, her lips swollen and damp and parted to accommodate her uneven breaths.

The fierce ache in his loins actually increased.

Muttering a silent oath, Rayne shook himself. He couldn't remember the last time a mere kiss had affected him so powerfully, or when his possessive male instincts had been so sharply aroused.

And her question was not one he could answer readily. Why *had* he kissed her? He sure as hell knew better than to take advantage of a defenseless woman's plight, but his honor had escaped him for the moment.

"What if I said I got carried away, playing the role of your lover?" he asked, his voice thicker than he would have liked.

She blinked, as if struggling to come to her senses. Then her eyes narrowed. "But you are *not* my lover."

She was recovering from her daze, he noted, discomfited when she squared her shoulders and tightened her grip on her pistol, although not aiming it directly at him.

Rayne's mouth curved involuntarily. It would serve him right if she decided to pull the trigger, for his raging male impulses had been every bit as licentious as her baron's.

"You needn't fear," he said, attempting to keep his voice light. "I won't touch you again. If I do, you have my leave to shoot me."

He meant what he said, Rayne reflected. Deciding it wiser to remove himself from temptation, though, he retreated to the sofa and settled there, crossing one leg over the other, the better to hide the swollen bulge in his pantaloons.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Rayne Kenyon, Earl of Haviland."

She gave a start of recognition. "Kenyon?" she repeated as if surprised by his surname.

"Do you know me?"

"No... but I believe you knew my father. Captain David Ellis."

It was Rayne's turn to start. "*You* are his daughter Madeline?"

"Yes."

Rayne stared. Her revelation gave matters an entirely different perspective, since Captain David Ellis was the friend and fellow spy who had once saved his life.

Now he damned well knew he should never have kissed her.

Excerpt from *To Tame a Dangerous Lord* by Nicole Jordan
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