

TO BED A BEAUTY

EXCERPT - CHAPTER ONE

How astonishing that a gentleman would ask a perfect stranger to become his mistress without so much as an introduction.

—Letter from Miss Roslyn Loring to Fanny Irwin

London, June 1817

"They say he is a marvelous lover."

Unable to ignore such a provocative comment, Roslyn Loring reluctantly shifted her gaze across the crowded ballroom to scrutinize the tall, lithe nobleman who had just entered.

She had never met the handsome, rakish Duke of Arden, although she'd heard countless tales about him. He was the picture of a wealthy aristocrat—his fair hair gleaming amber under the chandeliers' light, his commanding, elegant form garbed in a black domino, the cloak-like garment his only concession to costume for the masquerade ball.

He wore no mask, so his striking features were clearly visible. And his attendance was obviously welcome to everyone but *her*. Immediately he became the intent focus of a bevy of beauties, all eager to attract his notice.

"What makes him so marvelous?" Roslyn asked, intrigued despite her regret at the duke's unwanted arrival.

Her friend Fanny Irwin smiled. "His amorous skills, my dear. It is said he has the power to make women weep."

Lifting an eyebrow behind her own mask, Roslyn pursed her lips wryly. "Why in heaven's name would making women weep be a coveted skill?"

"Weep with *rapture*, my dear. Arden is extraordinary because of the exquisite pleasure he can bring a woman."

"I cannot imagine."

Fanny responded with the musical laugh that had helped make her one of London's most sought-after courtesans. "I should hope not, since you have no experience with carnal matters. But it is a rare man who is concerned with his paramour's satisfaction, or who will see to her pleasure even before his own. That kind of lover is priceless."

Roslyn's gaze narrowed thoughtfully. She was here tonight in order to gain a measure of experience, yet she had no desire to begin with the duke. Arden was a close friend of her new guardian, the Earl of Danvers, who had recently become engaged to marry her elder sister Arabella. Roslyn didn't wish for the duke even to *see* her, since she was courting scandal attending a notorious Cyprians' ball. She expected to make his formal acquaintance at her sister's wedding in a fortnight, and it would never do to have him recognize her.

No doubt his grace would disapprove of her brazen excursion into the glittering realm of the demimonde. According to Arabella, Arden had been severely critical of his friend's betrothal,

skeptical that Lord Danvers could have fallen in love with the eldest Loring sister so quickly or so wholeheartedly.

Viewing the duke now, Roslyn had little trouble understanding his cynical response. His lean, chiseled features were remarkably handsome but rather proud; his bearing much as she would have expected from an aristocrat of his consequence—refined, commanding, a bit imperious. But a duke of Arden's extensive wealth and power had the right to arrogance, Roslyn supposed.

That he was reputed to be such an extraordinary lover, however, quite surprised her.

Her musings were interrupted as Fanny continued her frank observations. "Not that I have any *personal* knowledge with the duke, I want you to know. He prefers to keep one mistress at a time. Doubtless that is why he has come tonight—to choose a new mistress."

"What happened to his last one?" Roslyn asked, interested in learning all she could from Fanny.

"Possessiveness, my dear, which is a cardinal sin if you mean to keep your protector content. Particularly for a nobleman like Arden, who can have his pick of females."

He did seem to be examining the merchandise, Roslyn saw as the duke casually scanned the ballroom. Just then his gaze lit on her and paused in obvious interest. Reflexively, she took a step backward, feeling the sudden urge to hide. She had come incognito, the upper half of her face concealed by a mask, her own pale gold hair covered with a powdered wig and wide-brimmed bonnet.

But perhaps it was her uniqueness itself that attracted his attention. Although her décolletage was much lower than she liked in the costume she had borrowed from Fanny, she was dressed rather modestly as a shepherdess, while most of the other females here were scantily clad in the alluring costumes of Greek goddesses or Roman slave girls or Turkish harem beauties. Fanny had come as Cleopatra, which complimented her exotic features and raven hair.

When Roslyn saw that Arden's focus remained fixed on herself, her heart skipped a beat. Even at this distance, she could feel the impact of his penetrating gaze.

"He is looking directly at me," she murmured half vexed, half concerned.

"That is hardly surprising," Fanny said in amusement. "Your combination of elegance and innocence is a novelty at a fete such as this. You are a rare English rose compared to the more exotic blooms for sale here."

Roslyn slanted her friend an exasperated glance. "You know very well I am not for sale."

"But *he* does not know it. Arden naturally assumes you are here to display your wares and sell your services."

"Well, I am not. I only came to find out how your colleagues comport themselves with their patrons."

"You should be flattered to pique his grace's interest," her friend remarked, teasing.

"Good heavens, I am not flattered, Fanny! Rather I am alarmed. I don't dare let Arden discover my identity. I will have to face him across the church isle in two weeks, and I don't want him

bearing tales about me to my new guardian. I think I should find a potted palm to hide behind. Look... he is moving this way!"

Taking another step backward, Roslyn slipped behind a marble column. Fanny joined her there, laughter lurking behind the eyeholes of her mask.

"You may cease laughing, traitor," Roslyn muttered. "It is not *your* reputation at risk."

"No, I suppose not, since I gave mine away several years ago." Fanny's expression suddenly sobered a little. "It is just as well that you have no interest in Arden, Roslyn. He may be a magnificent lover, but he reportedly has no heart. And you only want a man who is capable of falling in love."

"Yes, exactly."

She intended to make a love match someday, and cynical, rakish dukes were not known for contracting matrimonial unions for any reason other than their duty and convenience.

Canting her head slightly, Roslyn peered beyond the column. "Blast it, he is still headed this way." More urgently, she glanced behind her at the rear entrance doors. "I cannot stay here. There must be someplace I can take refuge until he quits the ball."

"There is a gallery at the rear of the building with numerous alcoves where couples may be intimate, but they shouldn't all be occupied yet, since the night is still relatively young. Why don't you seclude yourself there for a time? Arden never remains long at these events. I will find you once he leaves."

"An excellent idea," Roslyn said, turning quickly.

"Don't run," Fanny advised. "That will only arouse his primal male urge to pursue fleeing prey."

Forcing herself to pause, Roslyn threw an arch glance over her shoulder. "I have no intention of becoming any man's prey. And if he should speak to you, Fanny, you cannot give me away."

Her friend affected a mock wounded look. "I'll have you know, I am the soul of discretion. In my profession, a guarded tongue is worth more than gold. Now go! He will forget all about you if he cannot find you. And if he persists, I will attempt to mislead him."

"I wish you will send him to the devil," Roslyn murmured as she moved away, vexed at having her plans for the evening spoiled by Arden's unexpected presence. She was here to learn the secrets of attracting a gentleman's ardor, and being forced to hide herself away would hardly help her attain her goal.

Keeping her head bent low to prevent her bonnet from being tracked, Roslyn skirted the crowd and slipped out the rear doors, only to find herself in a dim corridor. When her eyes adjusted, she made her way down the hall to an even dimmer gallery that apparently ran the width of the building. The yearly Cyprians' ball was a public assembly, but for this occasion, all the rooms save the main ballroom had been poorly lit, the better for trysts and assassinations.

As Fanny had advised, Roslyn found numerous empty alcoves stationed along either side of the gallery. Slipping into the last one on her left, she let the velvet draperies fall closed behind

her, yet she could still see well enough in the moonlight flooding through the floor-length window at the rear of the alcove.

Too restless to sit, Roslyn disregarded the welcoming chaise longue and instead pushed open the window. The June night air was cool and damp compared to the stuffy, perfumed warmth of the ballroom, and with a sigh of resignation, she stepped out onto a narrow balcony, prepared to outwait the duke.

"Devil take him," Roslyn muttered another recrimination at the vexing nobleman. "Why must he appear just when the ball was getting interesting?"

She'd had high hopes for the evening. Until now she had never mingled with a company of lightskirts, and she was fascinated by what she had seen and learned thus far.

Indeed, until recently, Roslyn had rarely mixed with any sort of society during the past four years. Instead, she'd lived quietly in the country—at Danvers Hall near Chiswick, some half dozen miles west of London—with her sisters and their curmudgeonly step-uncle and guardian, the Earl of Danvers, who had grudgingly taken them in after their parents mired them in shame and scandal.

Four years ago their mother had run off with her lover to the Continent. Then their libertine father had promptly gambled away the last of his fortune and been killed in a duel over his mistress, which had ruined any last gasp chances the Loring sisters had of making good marriages.

They had endured with fortitude the disgrace and rejection and poverty that followed. They'd even found a way to earn their own livings so they would no longer be at the mercy of their miserly step-uncle for mere sustenance. With the support of a wealthy patroness, they had started a successful academy to teach the daughters of wealthy merchants and industrialists how to be proper ladies and compete in the lofty, disdainful world of the ton.

But the lack of matrimonial prospects had struck Roslyn the hardest. Of the three sisters, she was the one who still secretly dreamed of marrying for love and having children. Yet although her birth and breeding were impeccable, being penniless and tainted by her parents' scandals severely limited her choices.

Even more detrimental were her looks. She was widely considered the most beautiful of the three sisters, to her immense regret. Her golden hair and fine-boned features along with her tall, slender build made her seem deceptively delicate. That appearance of fragility, combined with her family's disgrace and the lack of a strong male protector, had left Roslyn vulnerable to the unwanted advances of disreputable rakes and roués, and she'd suffered more than one mortifying proposition that entailed sordid debauchery rather than respectable marriage.

Just remembering now made her shiver.

Clenching her jaw, Roslyn stepped closer to the balcony railing to gaze down at the nearly empty lane below. She would never settle for becoming some man's mistress. Nor would she ever marry for any reason but true love.

Which is why you resolved to take control of your own fate and find a husband who could share that elusive ideal.

Before she could act on her resolve, however, her pitiful prospects had improved significantly. Several months ago, their elderly step-uncle passed away and the new Earl of Danvers, Marcus Pierce, assumed their guardianship. Loath to be saddled with three impoverished almost-spinsters, Marcus had declared his intention of finding husbands for them all—which had precipitated a spirited battle with the eldest, Arabella, over their independence and resulted in an unexpected love match between her and Marcus.

Roslyn was overjoyed for Arabella... and grateful for her own sake as well, since Marcus had generously granted his two youngest wards their legal and financial independence so they could choose their own futures.

Roslyn had known exactly what future she wanted, only she wasn't quite sure how to achieve it. Thus, she'd called on the experience and expertise of her childhood friend, Fanny Irwin, a once genteel young lady who had left home at sixteen to become one of London's most celebrated Cyprians.

Fanny had brought Roslyn here to the Cyprians' ball tonight, but now, to her dismay, her education had been rudely interrupted by the Duke of Arden's unwanted arrival.

Muttering another mild imprecation under her breath, Roslyn reached up to press her fingers against her temple. Her head was beginning to throb under the weight of her wig and bonnet, and the suffocating mask was rubbing a raw spot on her left cheek.

At least she could mitigate some of her suffering by removing the offending bonnet and mask.

Roslyn untied the ribbons beneath her chin and slid the bonnet off, then loosened the strings of her mask and drew it down. As the cool night air fanned her face, she gave a sigh of relief... until a low, masculine voice spoke behind her:

"So this is where you are hiding yourself."

Gasping in startlement, Roslyn whirled and promptly dropped her bonnet when she recognized the tall, imposing nobleman standing there. His broad, domino-clad shoulders filled the narrow embrasure, while his amber hair glinted more silver than gold in the moonlight.

Alarmed to see the duke, she fumbled to replace her mask, hoping he hadn't been afforded a clear glimpse of her face. "How you startled me..." she exclaimed too breathlessly as she finished tying the strings.

"Forgive me. It was the least of my intentions—to discomfit a beautiful woman."

Roslyn's gaze narrowed through her mask. His tone was mild, languid even. If he was attempting to flatter her, he wasn't making much effort. But perhaps he was merely playing an expected game, spouting compliments he thought she wished to hear.

There was nothing languid about the warm glance that raked over her figure, however. Instead his eyes showed pure male interest—and had the deplorable effect of making her pulse race.

"I am Arden."

"I know who you are, your grace," Roslyn said rather crossly. He was Andrew Moncrief, Duke of Arden, known as "Drew" to his intimates. And she had seldom been less pleased to see anyone in her life.

His eyebrow lifted at her tone. "Regrettably, I do not know *you*, my lovely Incognita. I would have sought an introduction, but you fled the moment you spied me. And Fanny suddenly made herself scarce before I could even discover your name."

Having no valid defense, Roslyn remained mute. When the duke stepped forward and bent to retrieve her dropped bonnet from the balcony floor, she would have retreated except that the railing was at her back. Trapped, she was forced to endure his scrutiny. He stood watching her in speculation, holding the ribbons in his long fingers.

Roslyn stared back, unable to help herself. It was too dark to be certain, but she thought his eyes were green. A deep, vibrant green. And this close, his lean, aristocratic features were even more sensually compelling than at a distance. His nearness, as well, had a devastating effect on her composure.

He spoke before she could gain control of her whirling thoughts. "I congratulate you, sweeting. Your ploy worked."

"My ploy?" she repeated, puzzled.

"You hoped I would pursue you here, and you succeeded. I was intrigued enough to follow you."

He thought she had purposely lured him here to the alcove? "It was no ploy, your grace. I found the ballroom overly warm and came here for a respite."

One corner of his mouth twisted sardonically. "How convenient that you chose a location so well equipped for an assignation," he said, nodding at the chaise longue behind him. Before she could protest, he went on. "You must be new to London. I would certainly have remembered had I seen you before now."

Roslyn hid her wince of dismay. She hoped his memory was not so keen when she encountered him at her sister's wedding in a fortnight. "Yes, I am new to London. But I promise you, I did not lure you here for an assignation."

And she had no intention, either, of prolonging this unwanted encounter. Murmuring a polite "thank you," Roslyn retrieved her bonnet from his grasp and tried to slip past him.

The duke, however, reached out to curl his fingers lightly around her wrist. "One might think you are actually eager to avoid me."

"One might."

"Why?" His tone held surprise and genuine curiosity.

"I dislike the way you are inspecting me, as if I am merchandise to be purchased."

"I stand corrected." His lips curved in a rueful smile that was slow, sensual. "I don't think of you as merchandise, I assure you."

It was impossible to ignore that captivating male smile, and Roslyn suddenly understood why females pursued Arden in droves. "Then you will pray excuse me," she murmured, her voice more uneven than she would have liked.

Pointedly, she glanced down at his imprisoning grasp, yet he didn't release her. "Are you currently taken?"

She blinked. "Taken?"

"Do you have a protector yet?"

He was asking if she was currently employed as a lightskirt, Roslyn realized. She considered saying yes, but then she would have to come up with a name for her non-existent patron, and Arden would very likely see through her lie. "No, I have no protector."

"Then why don't you simply name your price? I dislike haggling."

She stared up at him. "Are you asking me to be your... *mistress*?"

His smile turned bland. "Unless you have another proposition in mind? Yes, I am asking you to be my mistress, darling."

Roslyn knew her jaw had dropped inelegantly, but she couldn't help it. It shocked her a little that he would offer such an intimate position to a perfect stranger. "We are complete strangers, your grace. You know nothing about me."

"I know enough to find you lovely and desirable. What more is necessary?"

"I could be a vicious harpy, for all you know."

"I am willing to risk it. A thousand pounds a year during pleasure. Half that should we decide to part ways sooner."

When Roslyn remained gaping with astonishment, he cocked his head and nodded briefly, as if coming to a decision. "Very well, two thousand. And of course I will pay all your expenses... a house and carriage plus an allowance for clothing and jewels."

Roslyn couldn't help being amused. It seemed an outrageous sum to offer an untried courtesan, although she knew Fanny made several times that amount. "How can you be certain I am worth it?"

Appreciative laughter lit his eyes as he gave a casual shrug. "Your beauty is alluring enough to satisfy my discriminating tastes. Anything else you need to know I can teach you."

Roslyn's own amusement faded as anger pricked her. Arden had unwittingly struck a raw nerve. He couldn't know that her beauty—or more precisely, being coveted solely for her physical attributes—was a painfully sore point with her.

She also realized it was ridiculous to resent his quite generous proposition, since she was here tonight pretending to be a Cyprian. But after the other shameful offers she had already received over the past four years, she couldn't respond with equanimity.

"I believe the proper response is to thank you for your generous offer, your grace," she said coldly, withdrawing her wrist from his grasp, "but I must decline."

His eyebrow shot up at her wintry tone. "It is common practice to feign reluctance in order to increase your price, but you will find that I dislike coyness."

Roslyn bristled. "I do not *have* a price, nor am I trying to be coy. I simply have no desire to have you for my lover—despite your vaunted reputation."

His eyes narrowed. "Did Fanny say something to give you a fear of me?"

"No."

"If you need to assure yourself of my qualifications, I would be happy to demonstrate."

"I don't need a demonstration. I don't doubt your expertise in the least."

"Then perhaps we should test *your* skills." Before she could do more than draw a breath, he stepped even closer and cupped her face in his hands. "Kiss me, love, and show me your charms."

His bold gesture caught her completely off guard. Roslyn went rigid with dismay as the duke bent his head and captured her mouth with his.

It was a startling kiss, not only because of its unexpectedness but because of the effect it had on her entire body. His lips moved over hers in a sensual exploration that was tender and arousing and wildly exciting.

She had been kissed before, but nothing whatsoever like this. Her skin suddenly felt covered in heat, as if she were standing too close to a fire.

Her heart was pounding when he finally shifted his caresses away from her mouth. His lips brushed fleetingly along her jaw to her ear, where they lingered. "You taste like innocence," he murmured, his voice surprisingly husky. "It is a charming act, but entirely unnecessary."

"It is no act," Roslyn replied shakily. "I am not experienced."

He drew back enough to study her, his gaze skeptical. "I much prefer honesty."

Roslyn stiffened. "You don't believe me?" she asked in a warning tone.

He reached up with his fingertips to trace her lips beneath her mask. "Let us say I am willing to be convinced. Come here, my sweet...."

He bent to her once more and kissed her again, this time more passionately. Alarmed by her own response, Roslyn tried to retreat, but Arden pulled her fully against his body, letting her feel the hardness of him, the vitality.

Stunned by his devastating sensuality, Roslyn whimpered, amazed that she could be so aroused by a man's embrace. When finally he broke off the kiss and raised his head, she looked up at him in an unfocused daze.

His smile was rueful. "I confess... most women don't have this powerful an effect on me. You feel it, too, Beauty, don't deny it."

It was true, she had never in her life experienced anything like it—this lightning bolt of attraction that sparked between them. This devastating heat and desire. This yearning.

Not that she would ever admit it to *him*.

Struggling to regain a semblance of composure, Roslyn cleared her throat.

"Indeed?" she managed to say with a blithe laugh. "Your arrogance is astonishing, your grace."

It was obviously not the response he expected, and Roslyn pressed her point. "Your vanity is vastly overinflated if you think I am eager to leap into your bed."

The slow, charming smile he gave her was impossibly wicked, impossibly seductive... and sensual enough to bewitch a saint. "A bed isn't necessary. We can make use of the chaise lounge behind us." He waved in the general direction of the alcove. "And at the same time we can remedy the fact that we are strangers."

"I have no desire to become better acquainted with you."

"Perhaps I can change your mind."

He raised his hand, his warm fingers tracing a path from the hollow of her throat to the swells of her breasts, which thrust prominently upward in her shepherdess costume.

"Your grace..." Roslyn protested in an unsteady voice.

"Hush, let me pleasure you."

Excerpt from *To Bed a Beauty* by Nicole Jordan
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