

THE ART OF TAMING A RAKE
by Nicole Jordan

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE

London; April 1817

"Take care, Venetia. Traherne has a magical touch with the fair sex. If you tangle with him, even *you* may find him impossible to resist."

Her friend's recent warning echoing in her head, Venetia Stratham watched the tableaux across the crowded gaming room. She had run her quarry to ground at London's most notorious sin club and found him surrounded by fawning beauties.

Well, perhaps not *surrounded*, Venetia corrected herself in a fit of honesty. But he certainly wasn't lacking for adoring female companionship just now.

Quinn Wilde, Earl of Traherne, was reportedly a splendid lover, and Venetia had no doubt the gossip was true. In all likelihood, his expertise in boudoirs and bedchambers was a chief reason women vied for his favor and tripped over themselves to earn his patronage. Whatever his sensual attributes, though, he was indisputably a rake of the first order. She had come here tonight seeking proof of his transgressions to show her sister -- and here it was, right before her eyes.

Beware of what you wish for. The cautionary adage came to mind, and oddly, her feeling of triumph was trumped by keen disappointment.

She had hoped she was wrong about Lord Traherne.

An inexplicable, exasperating reaction if she had ever felt one.

Traherne was lounging carelessly in his seat at the Faro table, but she had easily located him among the gamblers upon her arrival some twenty minutes ago. With the striking features and form of a Grecian sculpture -- tall, sleek, muscular -- he stood out in the company. She could not miss his aristocratic elegance either, or his gleaming fair hair -- dark gold streaked with lighter threads of silver.

The two lightskirts hovering at his shoulder, showering him with attention, were also an identifying clue and put to rest any lingering questions Venetia might have had about his predilection for debauchery.

Her lips pressed in a frown of self-reproach. She should be extremely pleased to find the confirmation she'd sought. To think she had once held Lord Traherne in high esteem. In her defense, her admiration had developed before she'd known the kind of heartbreaker he was. Before she had lost her hopeless naivete to another sinfully seductive nobleman.

For her, "Beware of blue-blooded Lotharios" was a more appropriate admonition than careful wishing. She had learned that particular lesson quite painfully. And most definitely, she didn't want her younger sister falling prey to Traherne's spellbinding temptation.

Oh, his other vices such as gambling for high stakes did not overly concern her. With his enormous fortune, he could well afford to risk large sums on the turn of a card, especially since he regularly won. It was the carousing and womanizing that gravely troubled Venetia. Clearly Traherne was no better than her former betrothed, intent on only carnal pleasure, no matter who suffered hurt and heartbreak.

Just then another curvaceous Cyprian brought the earl a glass of port and remained to observe the play at his table. When the painted beauty draped herself over his arm, trailing suggestive fingers along the sleeve of his superbly tailored coat, Venetia stifled a sound of disgust in her throat.

Now Traherne had not two but *three* clinging demi-reps eager to serve his every need.

But then, women of all ages tended to tumble at his feet. She herself was not immune to his lethal charm, much to her dismay. His smile was captivating, piercing female hearts with deadly accuracy. And when those clever blue eyes glimmered with amusement... well, her pulse quickened each and every time, as if she had sprinted a great distance.

In fact, Traherne's entire family possessed the same formidable charm in extraordinary abundance. The five Wilde cousins of the current generation were the darlings of the ton--

Suddenly his lordship's blue gaze shifted in her direction to scan the company. Quickly Venetia adjusted her face mask and tried to blend into the throng of gamblers and *filles de joie*. She had attended a sin club once before, in Paris with her widowed friend Cleo, and this one was similarly genteel. The gaming room boasted a large gathering, as did the adjacent drawing room, where dancing and refreshments and a lavish buffet supper were offered for the guests' enjoyment. She could hear music and laughter and gay conversation drifting through the connecting doorway.

Except for the risque apparel of the women present, this could have been an elite artist's salon -- the sort of sophisticated assemblies she had frequented during her past two years of exile in France. Yet she ought not have come here tonight. If she was caught in this den of iniquity, it would only cement her scandalous reputation, which could further wound her family. But she had needed proof of Traherne's sins to show her sister just how dangerous he was to any gullible young lady's heart.

As if to prove her point, the earl glanced up at his adoring companion and smiled his brilliant smile. A pang of jealousy hit Venetia with astonishing force.

How absurd -- how *infuriating* -- to be so foolishly affected, even if her reaction could be blamed on elementary human nature. She well knew that masculine breeding, charm, virility, and stunning good looks were potent weapons against the fair sex. In her case, Traherne's keen wit and sharp mind had impressed her far more.

It was a grave pity that he was such a rake, squandering his exceptional intelligence and talents on dissipation and libertine ways. Ordinarily she wouldn't care how many women he seduced or how many mistresses he kept, but her sister was very dear to her, even if they *had* been estranged these past two interminable years.

And if *she* could not conquer her attraction to him, what chance did her highly susceptible sister have?

Despite the rumors about his budding courtship of the younger Miss Stratham, Venetia could not credit that a nobleman of his stamp actually wished to wed a green girl barely out of the schoolroom. But whether he had marriage -- or worse, seduction -- in mind, it could not end well for starry-eyed Ophelia.

As if sensing Venetia's scrutiny, Traherne refocused his penetrating gaze through the crowd to stare directly at her. The spark that flared in his vivid eyes at her immodest attire made her breath catch. She had borrowed her evening gown of scarlet velvet from Cleo in order to fit in with the other ladies of the evening. The décolletage dipped much lower than her usual wont, leaving her shoulders and the upper swells of her breasts bare.

The shock of Traherne's admiring masculine perusal caught her off guard. Instinctively, Venetia took a step backward, swearing to herself. A mere glance should not have impacted her so powerfully, no matter how lascivious. He was simply being a *man*, after all.

She was also concerned that he would see through her disguise. Lord Traherne had witnessed firsthand the most humiliating, painful event of her life. Not only witnessed but actively *participated*. She was to blame for her own downfall, of course. But his actions had triggered the rash, prideful decision that had changed her fate forever. Moreover, she did not wish to give him the satisfaction of seeing her at such a disadvantage -- forced to sneak around clandestinely, an outcast of decent society.

"May-yi have the honor of a dansh, my lovely?"

Venetia gave a start at the interruption. With her thoughts so fixed on the earl's sinful character, she'd been unaware of another gentleman approaching, this one much shorter and somewhat younger than Traherne, with darker hair and more flamboyant garb. The dandy's slurred words suggested that he was already half foxed.

Venetia hid a grimace at the unexpected annoyance. She needed no complications to divert her attention from her goal of saving her sister from the Earl of Traherne's romantic pursuit.

With effort, she pasted an apologetic smile on her lips before answering sweetly. "Thank you, kind sir, but I will not be staying much longer this evening."

Rather than accept her rebuff, the drunkard slipped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close.

With an inward sigh, Venetia set about the task of extricating herself from this unwanted predicament. She was not afraid of being assaulted in so public an arena. Even a notorious hell had rules of accepted behavior to follow, certainly one that catered to high-class clientele such as this. Any number of nobles and gentlemen of the ton were present tonight, as well as a few wellborn ladies attending incognito.

But this was simply one more damning demonstration that men were often led by their lustful urges rather than honor or common sense, and she was growing exceedingly weary of having to deal with their peccadillos.

Distracted from his fruitless Faro game, Quinn narrowed his gaze on the masked beauty across the room. She had endeavored to remain unobtrusive, but she was far too noticeable.

Puzzled and curious as to why she was watching him so intently, Quinn absently played another card. Her familiarity nagged at him. She wore a demi-mask and feathered silk turban to hide her hair, but her feminine attractions were quite apparent. The graceful carriage, the ripe breasts, the lush mouth--

Quinn abruptly gave a mental start as his gaze shot back to her. She was indeed familiar. Miss Venetia Stratham.

What the devil?

He would have recognized her anywhere. She was the kind of woman a man never forgot. Not least because she had been engaged to marry a friend and peer.

She was one of the loveliest women he had ever encountered -- luminous dark eyes, rich brown hair, creamy skin, with the most kissable mouth imaginable. Pure temptation even to a man of his jaded appetites. More than once he had fantasized about kissing those luscious lips. In truth, he'd wanted her from the first moment they met some four years ago during her comeout Season. But he had carefully controlled his lust. Miss Stratham was strictly forbidden to him. A gentleman did not poach, particularly from a friend.

Quinn was taken aback -- no, startled -- to see her here at an elite gaming hell known more for its sexual sport than high stakes gambling. She was still every inch an elegant lady, despite being gowned in brazen red velvet that complimented her shapely figure and almost regal bearing.

His attention now riveted, Quinn watched as an obviously inebriated gamester tightened an arm around her bare shoulders.

The sight troubled him enough that he barely heard the silken voice whispering in his ear:

"How else may I serve you, m'lord?"

"I want for nothing, thank you," Quinn replied, dismissing the high-flyer at his side with much less finesse than usual.

His mind was fixed solely on Venetia Stratham. Had she fallen so low that she was now offering her body for sale? The possibility fiercely disturbed him. Remorse sent his thoughts winging back two years ago, when he'd last laid eyes on her.

She had shocked the ton by jilting her noble fiance on the church steps, creating a spectacle by boxing his ears and aborting the wedding ceremony in front of over two hundred guests. She'd then flung Quinn a scathing glance as she passed him on the way to her waiting carriage, no doubt despising him for the role he'd played in her bridegroom's dissipation.

The very public denunciation of her betrothed had been the talk of London for weeks, until another titillating scandal had come along to supplant hers.

Quinn badly wanted to know what the devil she was doing in a high-class brothel. And why was she observing him so surreptitiously?

Her unexpected presence was enough to distract him from the task he'd set for himself -- gaining leverage over his current opponent, Edmund Lisle, by winning overwhelmingly at Faro tonight.

And watching a young fop proposition her was downright unsettling.

Quinn voiced an oath under his breath as he recognized the young blade. Lord Knowlsbridge was in his cups, swaying as he embraced her. Evidently Miss Stratham was not welcoming his attention, though, for she had pasted a pained smile on her lips while trying to extricate herself from his grasp.

She was ill-equipped to fend off a drunken lecher, Quinn suspected, his protective instincts keenly aroused. And seeing the young lord attempt to kiss her was the last straw.

Experiencing a quiet swell of fury, Quinn tossed down his cards and surged to his feet, scattering the lightskirts surrounding him and surprising the pretty Faro dealer. It was poor-mannered of him to treat the pleasure club's attendants so thoughtlessly, and supremely bad form to leave a game in mid-play. But even had his concentration not been shattered, he couldn't sit still while a soused coxcomb pawed at Venetia Stratham.

With a faint smile of apology to the others, Quinn addressed his opponent. "Pray forgive me, Lisle, but I willingly concede. We must resume our game at some other time."

He could feel Lisle shooting daggers in his back as he walked away. There was no love lost between them, with their contentious past involving a jealous mistress, and now the question of how Lisle had come to possess a distinctive piece of jewelry that might once have belonged to Quinn's French mother. But solving the mystery of a missing family heirloom would have to wait.

As he weaved his way through the crowd, intent on rescuing Miss Stratham, he saw Knowlsbridge endeavoring to remove her mask while she strove to keep it in place. Quinn doubted she wished her identity revealed, for even if she had joined the muslin company -- willingly or not -- her family's reputation could still suffer from a fresh scandal. And with a younger sister of prime marriageable age, Venetia would be wise to keep her affairs discreet.

He had nearly reached her when, despite her predicament, she saw him approaching and visibly flinched, whether in surprise or dismay, he couldn't tell. For an instant, she started to retreat, then stood her ground, her chin raised, as if bracing herself for the encounter.

"There you are, my dove," Quinn said easily as he came up to her. "I have been eagerly awaiting your company."

When Knowlsbridge took advantage of her temporary distraction to cup her breast, another sharp wave of anger flooded Quinn.

"I'll thank you to leave the lady alone," he warned an instant before she managed to drive the point of her elbow into the sot's flaccid belly and make him grunt.

"Sheesh not... a lady," the young lord complained, wheezing for breath.

"Regardless, she is mine."

Quinn slipped an arm around Miss Stratham's waist and drew her close. "I have missed you, darling. Have you missed me?"

She possessed huge, lustrous dark eyes, which were mostly hidden behind her mask, but even obscured, her gaze held startlement. She was clearly wondering what he was about.

But Quinn knew the jackanapes beside her understood the situation quite well: A more powerful male marking his territory, showing possession.

"Are you not pleased to see me, love?" he prodded Venetia.

"I... why, yes, my lord," she stammered, reminding Quinn how pleasantly musical her voice was.

"Perhaps you should show me how much."

Bending his head, he captured that full, kissable mouth the way he had longed to do for years.

She gave a faint gasp at the contact and stiffened in response. Quinn could feel shock ripple through the graceful curves of her body, while his own breath quickened at the enticing taste of her.

Her lips were just as delectable as he'd imagined, he thought, relishing their softness. Lush, resilient, the texture of silk, ripe and warm as her body.

When she tensed further, he increased the pressure, parting the seam of her mouth and slipping his tongue inside to tangle with hers.

Her lips trembled under his. Encouraged, he changed the slant of his head and took her mouth more thoroughly, coaxing her to participate in her own seduction, parting her lips wider with his thrusting tongue.

When finally she opened completely to him, Quinn felt the unexpected impact like a jolt of lightning: Heat, pleasure, excitement, sheer satisfaction.

Her taste was keenly arousing and infinitely sweet. Sliding one hand behind her nape, he pulled her closer so that he could drink more deeply of her.

The crowd fell away so there was only the two of them, man and woman, enjoying an embrace powerful enough to shake them both. Her scent wrapped around him as he savored her mouth.

It was a slow, devastating, spellbinding kiss. When her entire body softened instinctively against him, her surrender only increased his craving for her. Painfully aroused now, Quinn felt a primal male urge to take what he wanted -- and an even stronger need to heighten her desire.

When his tongue delved insistently inside her mouth, exploring, she gave a helpless moan and leaned into him. The sharp pleasure of it stabbed him in his loins, a pleasure that only heightened when her hand crept up to twine about his neck.

He felt another measure of triumph when her tongue met his willingly this time. Raising a hand to cradle her jaw, he angled his head even further, the better to devour her mouth.

Her breath faded to a sigh as their tongues mated. The tantalizing promise of her response stirred a searing need in Quinn. It had been a very long while since he'd experienced such a sizzling sexual attraction. Perhaps never.

Stark lust turned him hard and renewed his fierce feeling of possessiveness. The sensation rocked him -- and Venetia, too, he had no doubt, aware of her shiver of aroused excitement.

When at last he broke off, he kept hold of her waist to support her as she swayed weakly.

Her eyes fluttering open, she raised her face to stare at him. Despite her demi-mask, he could see those lovely eyes were dazed. Her hand rose to touch her lips in wonder, as if feeling the burn there.

She was profoundly shaken, he knew. He felt her trembling as she returned his gaze speechlessly.

Quinn was at a loss for words himself. He couldn't recall ever feeling such tangible desire....

The sound of nearby laughter served to break the spell.

Venetia visibly shook herself and pressed her hands against his chest. Reluctantly, Quinn released her and cleared his throat, quelling the urge to adjust his satin breeches in public. He couldn't remember a time when he'd lost control of his urges so blatantly.

When he heard another nearby sound, this one an admiring male scoff, he realized the cawker was watching with resentment and envy.

"You have all the damnable luck, Traherne," the young lord mumbled almost soberly. "'Tis a pity."

"Pray take yourself off, Knowsbridge," Quinn ordered in dismissal. "You can see we are occupied."

His voice was husky with passion but held enough authority that the drunken gamester did as he was bid and ambled away, leaving Quinn in sole possession of Venetia.

She was still flustered from his kiss, yet she recovered her tongue readily enough. "I should have expected you to act so outrageously, Lord Traherne."

He raised an eyebrow. "What was so outrageous?"

"You did not have to kiss me."

"It seemed the easiest way to prevent that fribble from pulling off your mask. I presumed you would not want to be recognized. Was I wrong?"

"No," she answered reluctantly. "But I am not your *dove*,"

"You and I know that, but for his benefit, I needed to stake my claim to you."

When her mouth curved in frustration, Quinn quizzed her. "I thought you would be grateful to me for saving you."

"I did not require *saving*, my lord--"

Her voice had risen noticeably, and she cut off her exclamation upon realizing that they were the object of numerous curious pairs of eyes.

"Shall we take this discussion elsewhere, darling?" he suggested. "Unless you prefer to cause a scene?"

She clearly didn't like his endearment, yet knew he couldn't use her name if she was to preserve her anonymity. And she must have comprehended the wisdom of his proposal, for she nodded briefly.

When Quinn gestured toward the staircase at the rear of the gaming hall, however, she hesitated. "Upstairs, do you mean?"

On the floors above, carnal amusement was the prime entertainment.

"The pleasure rooms are the most appropriate choice if I am to command your services for the evening."

Her lovely mouth fell open, but when he added in explanation, "It will give the appearance of your being my chosen *inamorata*," she stifled her protest.

Before she could change her mind, Quinn swept out his hand, indicating for her to precede him. After another long study, she turned toward the stairs, the delicate line of her jaw set in a stubborn grimace.

Hiding a wry smile, he followed Miss Stratham. Anticipation lightened his previously sour mood and eased the physical pain of kissing an irresistible but resistant beauty, leaving him with a sense of unfulfilled promise.

His frustrating evening thus far was becoming more intriguing by the moment.