

TO DESIRE A WICKED DUKE

EXCERPT – CHAPTER ONE

Although I have been off the Marriage Mart a good while now, I am quickly relearning an indisputable rule of engagement with the opposite sex: When you play with fire, you are likely to be burned... and Rotham is the hottest sort of fire.

—Diary Entry of Miss Tess Blanchard

Richmond, England; October 1817

The kiss was amazingly insipid.

Disappointment surged through Tess Blanchard as Mr. Hennessy drew her more fully into his embrace. She had expected so much more when she acquiesced to his impulsive gesture.

More excitement, more pleasure, more *feeling*. In short, she had secretly longed to be swept away by romantic passion.

Instead she found herself logically analyzing the construction of his lovemaking. The precise pressure of his lips. The exact angle of his head. The unarousing feel of his arms around her.

There was no spark, no *fire* between them at all, Tess realized sorrowfully. The entire business left her remarkably cold.

Oh, Patrick Hennessy certainly *seemed* skilled in the art of kissing, she mused as his mouth plied hers with increased ardor. But surely a man who counted himself such an expert lover should have elicited a stronger response from her?

Not that she had much basis for comparison. This was only the second man she had ever romantically embraced in her three-and-twenty years.

It had happened purely on a whim. One moment they were laughing together over a line in the comic play Hennessy had written. The next, an arrested expression claimed his features as he gazed down at her. When he stepped closer and bent his head to capture her lips, Tess had no thought of stopping him. For too long she had let herself languish on the shelf in the game of love, refusing to open herself up to renewed heartbreak. But it was past time to reenter the lists.

Admittedly, in Mr. Hennessy she was drawn by both curiosity and the lure of the forbidden. She knew better, of course. A proper lady did not indulge in scandalous experiments with libertine actors behind the stage curtains. Hennessy was known as something of a Lothario among the London theater crowd, although in addition to being a brilliant performer, he was also a successful manager of his own troupe, a budding playwright, and the talented director of Tess's two recent benefit concerts, which had raised vast sums for

her charities.

Then again, perhaps she was not giving him a fair chance.

Closing her eyes more tightly, Tess made a stronger effort to enter into the spirit of the kiss. In response, Hennessy's hand stole lower down her back, over her derriere, to pull her closer. Despite her own lack of enthusiasm, she had evidently affected *him*, judging by the swelling hardness she felt pressing against her lower abdomen—

"Well, well, are you practicing to play the part of lovers in your production, Miss Blanchard?"

At the sharp-edged drawl, a startled Tess tore her mouth away from Hennessy's — and froze in mortification upon recognizing that sardonic male voice. Obviously she had failed to hear anyone enter the ballroom where their makeshift stage was erected.

Good Lord, what utterly dreadful timing, to have her transgression discovered by the arrogant, infuriating Duke of Rotham, elder cousin of her late betrothed. Rotham had stepped behind the stage curtains to find her locked in a clandestine embrace with the man she had hired to produce her amateur theatrical.

Scalding heat flooded Tess's cheeks as she pulled away from her partner in crime. Hennessy had also reacted to the duke's unexpected appearance by releasing her instantly. Yet the actor looked not only guilty but somewhat alarmed, as if he'd been caught in a hanging offense.

Squaring her shoulders, Tess turned to face Ian Sutherland, the tall, lithe Duke of Rotham. His handsome face was an enigmatic mask in the muted daylight seeping over the stage curtains from the ballroom windows, but his mouth held a tightness that signified displeasure, perhaps even anger.

He had no right to judge her, she told herself defiantly.

"You are mistaken, your grace," Tess murmured, striving to keep her voice calm as she responded to his mocking tone. "There are no lovers in Mr. Hennessy's play. It is a merely a comedy of manners about a mischievous ghost."

"You were testing out a new role, then?"

"What may I do for you, Rotham?" Tess asked, ignoring his jibe. "We have only just concluded the dress rehearsal and still have a great deal to accomplish before this evening's performance."

They had constructed a stage at one end of the ballroom of her godmother's country mansion for the theatrical -- the crowning entertainment of the charitable benefit Tess had organized. Tess had engaged Hennessy and his troupe to put on the one-act play and direct the houseguests in their respective acting roles.

"I doubt your preparations entail kissing the hired help," Rotham drawled in that annoyingly cynical tone of his.

Tess stiffened. "It is hardly any of your business whom I kiss, your grace."

"I beg to differ."

Renewed ire rose in Tess. She would not allow him to dictate to her, as he was regularly fond of doing. Indeed, they had had similar arguments before. The Duke of Rotham was head of the family she would have married into had her betrothed not tragically perished two years ago at the Battle of Waterloo. But they had no real blood ties, and Rotham was mistaken in thinking that he had any say over her affairs. Particularly her amorous affairs.

Shifting his attention, Rotham turned his piercing gaze on Mr. Hennessy, who still seemed wary and on edge. "I expected better of you, Hennessy. You were supposed to be protecting her, not assaulting her. Is this how you fulfill your duties?"

The actor shot the duke a chagrined look of apology. "I beg your forgiveness, your grace. I fell down in my duties disgracefully." Rather sheepishly, he turned to Tess. "A thousand pardons, Miss Blanchard. I was vastly out of line."

Tess started to respond but Rotham interrupted her. "I'll thank you to leave us, Hennessy. I shall deal with you later."

Her jaw dropped at Rotham's arrogant dismissal, but before she could voice her objection aloud, Hennessy gave her a brief bow, then pivoted with alacrity and disappeared through a part in the curtains.

She remained speechless as she listened to him bound down the stage steps and hurry away across the ballroom. It was hardly chivalrous of him to abandon her to the mercies of the duke, Tess thought resentfully. No doubt he preferred not to challenge a nobleman of Rotham's station and far-reaching influence.

However, when she at last gathered her wits enough to protest, Rotham held up an imperious hand, forestalling her. "You should know better than to indulge in trysts with libertines such as Hennessy."

Prickling with indignation, Tess returned a mutinous look. The nerve of him, scolding her for a sin she had not even committed. "I was not indulging in any *tryst*, your grace. It was just a simple kiss."

The corner of Rotham's mouth curled. "It did not look at all *simple* to me. You were participating fully."

He sounded almost angry, although why he would be angry with her for returning the actor's kiss, she couldn't fathom.

"What if I *was* participating? It is no crime—"

Realizing how high-pitched and flustered her own voice sounded, Tess took a calming breath and forced a cool smile. "I truly cannot believe your gall, Rotham. How someone of your wicked character can deride another man for rakish behavior — or criticize me for something so innocent as a mere kiss — is the *height* of irony. Do you even recognize your hypocrisy?"

A hint of satirical amusement tugged at his lips. "I acknowledge your point, Miss Blanchard. But I am not the only one concerned about your relationship with Hennessy. Lady Wingate is worried that you have become overly attached to him. In fact, she sent me to find you."

That gave Tess pause, as doubtless Rotham knew it would. Baroness Wingate was not

just Tess's godmother but chief patron for her various charities. She could not afford to offend the noblewoman whose generosity impacted so many lives for the better.

"I have not become attached to Hennessy in the least," Tess finally replied. "He is a valued employee, nothing more."

"Do you make a habit of kissing all your employees?" Rotham taunted. Before she could reply, he shook his head in reproach. "Lady Wingate will be severely disappointed in you. She arranged a lavish house party solely for your sake, so you could dun her guests for your assorted charities. And *this* is how you repay her?"

Unable to refute the charge, Tess regarded Rotham in frustration. Her godmother had long disapproved of her endeavors to promote her charitable organizations and had only recently relented and invited some four dozen wealthy guests to a weeklong house party, thereby providing Tess with a captive audience. She'd spent the past week attempting to persuade each one of them to contribute to her causes.

"Do you mean to tattle to her?" she asked Rotham.

His answer, rife with mocking humor, disturbed her. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether or not you intend to continue your liaison with Hennessy."

"I tell you, I am *not* having a liaison with him! You have completely misconstrued the matter."

"Who initiated the kiss?"

"What does that matter?"

"If Hennessy took advantage of you, I will have to call him out."

"You cannot be serious!" Tess stared at him, appalled to think he might not be jesting. The last Duke of Rotham, Laurence Sutherland, had ended his licentious career when he was killed in a duel over a married woman by her jealous husband. His son Ian had followed a similar reckless path all through his youth, generating wild tales of gambling and womanizing. Ian Sutherland's scandalous endeavors had earned him the nickname "the Devil Duke" when he came into the title eight years ago. But surely he would not actually *shoot* Hennessy for the mere act of kissing her.

"You know very well that dueling is illegal," Tess objected, "in addition to being dangerous and possibly even lethal."

Rotham's mouth tightened again, as if he too had recalled his sire's ignominious end. "Indeed."

When he said nothing further, Tess suddenly recalled the confusing remark he'd made before ordering the actor from the ballroom. "What did you mean when you said Mr. Hennessy should have been 'protecting' me?"

Rotham waved a careless hand in dismissal. "It is of no import."

"I should like to know." Tess fixed him with a stubborn gaze, determined not to back down.

He must have sensed her resolve, for he gave a shrug of his broad shoulders. "When you began spending so much time at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden in preparation for your last charity event, I charged Hennessy with keeping an eye on you. The theater district is a dangerous area, especially for an unescorted young lady."

Her eyebrows lifted in puzzlement. "So you asked him to look after me?"

"Yes. I paid him a significant sum, in fact."

So *that* explained why Hennessy always insisted on escorting her to and from her carriage, Tess realized, and why he had hovered around her whenever she attended rehearsals. She had thought it was because the actor was growing enamored of her company. Irrationally, she couldn't help feeling a prick to her self-esteem.

"My companion usually accompanies me to the theater," she pointed out to Rotham.

"Your companion is an aging spinster with all the substance of a butterfly. She would be no help whatsoever if you were confronted by trouble."

That much was true, Tess conceded. Mrs. Dorothy Croft was tiny and gentle and soft-spoken, in addition to being a bit scatterbrained. The impoverished friend of Tess's late mother, Dorothy had needed somewhere to live after being widowed, so Tess had opened her home in Chiswick to her. The relationship had also benefited Tess. With a genteel, elderly lady to lend her single state respectability, she had much more freedom to conduct her charitable endeavors.

"I have a sturdy coachman and footmen to provide me protection should I require it," Tess argued.

Rotham's vivid gray gaze never faltered. "Even so, I thought it wise to ensure your safety. And you would not readily have accepted any edicts from me."

That was also certainly true. They had long been at odds — which is what made Rotham's current interest in her safety so startling. That he might be seriously concerned for her welfare had never crossed her mind.

"Well, you needn't worry about me, your grace. I am capable of providing for my own protection."

"Then you should refrain from kissing the likes of Hennessy. And he had best keep away from you. If he dares to touch you again, he will answer to me."

At the edge of possessiveness in the duke's tone, Tess's eyebrows narrowed in disbelief. He could not possibly be jealous. No doubt he was merely angry at Hennessy for disobeying a direct order, and at her for daring to contradict him.

"Your transgressions are a thousand times worse, Rotham."

"But I am not an unmarried young lady, as you are."

"I am not so young any more," Tess rejoined.

Instead of replying, Rotham hesitated, as if suddenly aware how sharp his tone had become. Shaking his head, he seemed visibly to repress his emotions, as if distancing himself from their argument.

His succeeding laugh was soft and laced with real amusement. "You are hardly ancient, Miss Blanchard. You only just turned twenty-three today."

Tess eyed him with suspicion. "How did you know it was my birthday?"

"As head of the family, it is my business to know."

"You are not head of *my* family."

"For all practical purposes, I am."

There it was again, that ironic drawl that convinced her he was deliberately attempting to provoke her.

It was infuriating, how Rotham always seemed to get under her skin, Tess reflected. Particularly when she was normally serene and even-tempered.

She had always thought him vexing — and deplorably fascinating. Rotham not only had a wicked reputation, he even *looked* wicked. He had striking gray eyes fringed by dark lashes, with lean, aristocratic features that were handsome as sin. His hair was a rich brown shot with gold threads, several shades lighter than her own sable hue, and held a slight curl. He possessed the muscular build of a sportsman, but with a lethal elegance that proclaimed his nobility.

Yet it was Rotham's powerful personality that made him utterly unforgettable.

At the moment his features were mainly in shadow, since it was barely noon on a dreary, rainy autumn day and they were shrouded by stage curtains. Yet he still had the strange ability to affect her, Tess acknowledged.

She'd felt that same magnetic allure the first moment of meeting Rotham during her comeout four Seasons ago, when he'd deigned to dance with her. But shortly afterward, she'd fallen in love with his younger cousin Richard.

Ever since, she had felt guilty for her forbidden attraction to the Duke of Rotham. He was every inch the fallen angel. And lamentably even now, she felt his hypnotic pull as his gray gaze bored into her....

In an effort to break the spell, Tess abruptly changed the subject. "What are you even doing here, Rotham? You never attend my functions, even when you are invited."

"Lady Wingate requested my presence for your birthday celebration this evening."

"So *that* is how you knew my age. She told you."

"No. I've known for some time. Richard was third in line to become my heir after two of our uncles. When you became betrothed to him, I made it a point to learn a great deal about you."

It made Tess profoundly uncomfortable to think that Rotham had such detailed personal

knowledge of her, or that he was privy to any of her secrets. But his next statement disturbed her even more.

"Given your history with my cousin, Miss Blanchard, it is only reasonable that I feel a certain responsibility toward you."

Her tone was sweetly spirited when she replied. "I told you, you needn't concern yourself with me."

"But Lady Wingate has every right. She fears you have been spending more time with Hennessy than is wise. It appears she has ample justification. What the devil were you thinking, kissing him?"

Tess's vexation returned full force. "I was experimenting, if you must know," she retorted defensively. "I have grown another year older without any prospects of romance or passion, and I wanted to see if I could change my fate. The sad truth is, I had forgotten entirely what it feels like to be kissed, and I thought Hennessy could remind me. Is that so wrong, your grace?"

A strange look settled over Rotham's face. She was surprised that he didn't return a mocking rejoinder. In addition to being impossibly arrogant, he possessed a cutting wit that could slice an opponent to ribbons. She'd seen victims of his acerbic tongue quail from him in tears. And more than once she herself had been on the losing end of their verbal battles. Normally it was all she could do to hold her own with him.

"I lead a very tame existence," Tess added grudgingly. "All very proper. My charities are extremely rewarding, but on the whole, my life is not particularly fulfilling."

When still he made no reply, and Tess bit her lower lip. How could she explain to a man like Rotham the restless yearning inside her? *He* had never been hemmed in by stifling rules of conduct, forced to subjugate his very nature to propriety. Even her charitable endeavors were subject to censure. Because she was a woman — and a lady, at that — even her dear godmother objected to her efforts. All she wanted was to make a difference in people's lives, but she had to fight for every single success.

Yet the chief source of her dissatisfaction went far deeper. For the past two years, her life had been barren of passion and joy. It was primarily her own fault, of course. She not only had gone into mourning for Richard, she'd practically buried herself with her late betrothed. But now she was determined to return to the world of the living.

The fact that this particular day was her birthday only made her more defiant than usual.

"In all honesty," Tess resumed her confession more quietly, "I suppose I was indulging in a touch of melancholy. I am practically a spinster, languishing on the shelf while life passes me by — a rather lonely way to live."

For a moment, Rotham's sensual features seemed to soften further... but only for a moment. "So you were feeling sorry for yourself?"

Tess gritted her teeth. "Yes, I was," she snapped.

Rotham looked strangely gratified by her acrimony, as if he preferred sparring with her to hearing her admit feeling any weak emotions such as sadness or loneliness.

"And what was your verdict?" he asked unexpectedly after a brief silence.

"Verdict? About what?"

"Did you enjoy kissing Hennessy?"

Color rose to bloom in Tess's cheeks. "Not particularly — not that it is any concern of yours."

She'd been extremely disenchanted with the actor's efforts. As kisses went, his were exceedingly dull. Although sadly, Richard's kisses had not been particularly thrilling either—

Tess winced inwardly. It was a betrayal to Richard's memory to voice such disloyal thoughts. Her self-reproach was distracting enough that she almost missed Rotham's casual statement: "You should have come to me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you wanted to know about passion, you should have applied to me. I can show you all you need to know about kissing."

She stared at Rotham, her jaw slack. Once again he had startled her into speechlessness. But perhaps he was simply mocking her.

"You think you could do better than Hennessy?" Tess asked archly.

A gleam of humor entered his eyes at her challenging tone. "Certainly I can."

She shook her head in bemusement. "If I were to kiss you, my reputation would end up in shreds," she remarked absently.

A wry half smile curved Rotham's mouth. "I am not quite that sullied."

"Yes, you are."

When he merely continued to smile that infuriatingly knowing smile, Tess finally grasped that he was serious.

Rotham is actually offering to kiss you, to show you passion himself.

Nervousness suddenly swamped Tess. She ought to tell him to go to the devil, so why was she even hesitating? And why was a rush of excitement sweeping her senses at the possibility of kissing him?

She knew better than to accept his offer. Rotham was infinitely dangerous. More hazardous than any man she had ever encountered in her life. And her long-standing sexual attraction to him was shameful. She'd spent the past four years trying to deny her fascination with him.

Even worse, he was fully aware of his spellbinding effect on women — including herself.

On the other hand... the thought of kissing him was sinfully intriguing. This was her chance to learn from an acknowledged expert, urged a scandalous voice inside Tess. He could

indeed show her everything she longed to know about passion — and probably much more.

Swallowing past the dryness of her throat, Tess glanced around her. The stage was set to resemble a Green Room at Drury Lane Theatre, since Hennessy's play centered on the legendary spirits who haunted that renowned theater, benevolent ghosts who appeared before performances to bless and encourage the actors. Behind her was a dressing table laden with cosmetics for applying stage makeup. Next to that stood a floor-length looking glass. And on the far end of the stage sat a chaise longue and several chairs for entertaining patrons and admirers.

Still debating, she turned back to face Rotham. When he took a step closer, decreasing the distance between them, fresh awareness assaulted Tess at the realization that they were wholly alone together.

She gazed mutely up at Rotham, searching his face. He had intense eyes. Vivid, dare-the-world eyes. Just now she felt as if she could drown in those vibrant gray depths. His high cheekbones and chiseled jawline, too, held a stark beauty that entranced her.

He was far too masculine and desirable, devil take him. She knew she should turn and run, yet she couldn't move.

And then he took the decision from her. Raising his hands, he slowly slid his fingers along either side of her jaw. As he lowered his head, her heart pounded so hard, her chest hurt.

When his mouth covered hers, a shock of surprise speared through Tess. She completely forgot to breathe. She could only remain rooted there, perfectly motionless, absorbing the jolting delight of Rotham's probing kiss against her lips.

Then he made her open for him. The scent of him filled her senses, the taste of him stole her reason. His mouth had the texture of heated silk, his exploring tongue a scalding wildness.

What a wicked, marvelous sensation. Emotions whirled and clashed within Tess, leaving her giddy. Her head swam with drugged pleasure, her body trembled. At her unconscious reaction, he thrust his tongue even deeper, inciting that delicious, melting weakness throughout her entire body.

He kissed like a possessive lover — or what she imagined a possessive lover to be. A whisper of a sigh escaped Tess. She had suspected that kissing Rotham would be remarkable, but she'd vastly underestimated how wonderful, how intensely glorious, it would be. The impact left her too flustered to think, too dazed to stand on her own. Reaching up, Tess weakly clutched at his shoulders.

Rotham only drew her closer.

The sinful thrill of being captured against that hard male body sent another hot ripple of weakness surging through her. The beguiling friction of his chest against her breasts only made her want more.

How was it possible to be so desperately attracted to a man she disdained? Tess wondered. No, her feelings went far, far beyond attraction. This was sheer yearning.

She felt stunned by the fire, by the sparks between them. She had never before been

struck by such lightning bolts of need. Richard had never once kissed her like this. His kisses had been tender and gentle. Not this magical, overwhelming, enchanting fervor....

Rotham must have felt her shiver of helpless excitement for he suddenly broke off and raised his head.

Tess felt slightly stunned by what she glimpsed in his hooded eyes. Desire shimmered there, she was certain of it. *Unwilling* desire.

Rotham stared down at her, as if trying to come to terms with the passion that had exploded between them. His gray eyes had darkened to smoke, and she could see the struggle on his face. His fierce resistance matched her own, she knew.

Yet he must have been affected by the same weakness, for he abruptly gave in with a curse.

His wonderful mouth possessed hers again. To her delight, his kiss turned even more fiery, seizing, claiming, demanding, making her very blood sizzle.

Tess whimpered when she felt him start to pull away again, but thankfully his lips never left hers as he swept her up in his arms and carried her across the stage to the chaise longue.

Still holding her, he turned and sank down so that she was cradled in his lap, one strong arm supporting her back, the other hand keeping her face immobile for the attentions of his marvelous mouth. Her mind reeling, Tess was utterly powerless to protest, nor did she even wish to. Instead, she wrapped both her arms around his neck and returned his kiss measure for measure.

Her nerves drank in sensations while exhilaration sang in her blood. She was pressed against a body that was rock hard and lean as he ruthlessly explored her mouth. His tongue teased her relentlessly... thrusting, retreating, returning. At the same time, his hand began to roam the bodice of her blue merino gown.

When he cupped her breast, Tess drew in a shuddering gasp. She ought to stop him, she knew, but heat scorched her, incinerating any remaining fragments of common sense she possessed. Thus, rather than push him away, she curled her fingers in Rotham's thick dark hair, clinging with her remaining strength.

At her obvious eagerness, he shifted his wicked mouth from her lips to graze over her cheekbone, then lower, beneath her jaw and along her bare throat, leaving a trail of fever on her skin. Enraptured by his caresses, Tess bent her head backward to give him better access.

"I can't catch my breath..." she fretted in a rasping voice.

"You don't need to breathe, angel. Just feel."

His husky half-whisper was as seductive as it was dangerous, but she obeyed his beguiling command, straining against his arousing palm as he caressed the swelling mounds of her breasts beneath the fine wool fabric. Within the constricting confines of her corset, she could feel her nipples peak to a tingling ache -- a result he seemed determined to encourage.

When his hand continued molding the contours of her breasts, Tess moaned out loud.

Sweet shocks of reaction compressed her chest, while her bones melted beneath the sensual onslaught.

"So beautiful," he murmured as he drew back.

Lifting her heavy eyelids a fraction, she glimpsed his face above her and saw that he was watching her every response. Her dazed gaze locked with his hypnotic one.

"Bloody hell, how I want you...." His gruff declaration somehow aroused her even more.

She wanted him, too. She felt as if she'd never lived until he touched her. The surge of want, of need inside her, overwhelmed Tess. She shuddered with the excitement of yearning as Rotham's hand abandoned her breasts and reached down to raise her skirts, baring her legs to mid-thigh. Then his dexterous fingers began to glide upward along her skin--

"*Good God*, what is the meaning of this?"

Even through her stupor, Tess recognized her godmother's outraged voice.

When she jerked her head up, she saw that the stage curtains had parted and the baroness stood there, the picture of wrath.

On the stage steps behind Lady Wingate stood several of her patrician houseguests, gaping at the sight of Tess sprawled on the Duke of Rotham's lap, her skirts in total disarray, his palm fondling her bare inner thigh. Their scandalized expressions presented a fitting complement to the baroness's furious one.

Aghast, Tess scrambled to right herself, awkwardly trying to push off Rotham's lap and struggle to her feet. She felt his strong hands on her hips, helping her to stand, then steady her when she swayed from dizziness.

He rose more slowly to face their horrified audience.

Lady Wingate was practically quivering with rage, her eyes shooting virtual daggers at them both. In a similar vein, Sir Alfred Perry and his high stickler wife, Lady Perry — who were among Tess's largest contributors — eyed them with supercilious scorn.

Tess felt her cheeks flush scarlet. When she glanced guiltily up at Rotham, she saw that an enigmatic look had settled over his features, yet his sensual mouth held a grimness that acknowledged the gravity of their social infraction.

In disbelief, Tess raised a hand weakly to her temple. How could she possibly have failed to hear their approach? No doubt her moans of pleasure had drowned out the sound of their footsteps.

Renewed shame flooded Tess. For the second time in half an hour, she had been discovered locked in a passionate embrace with a wicked gentleman.

Yet this time she had the sickening feeling that she'd sunk herself utterly beyond repair — and worse, that there would be no escaping the consequences.

Excerpt from *To Desire a Wicked Duke* by Nicole Jordan
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