



The Art of Taming a Rake (Legendary Lovers)

By Nicole Jordan

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Sparks abound in this sizzling new *Legendary Lovers* tale from *New York Times* bestselling author Nicole Jordan, in which a seductive rakehell must woo his spirited but love-shy bride while unmasking a mysterious assailant.

Despite his notorious reputation, Quinn Wilde, Earl of Traherne, has mostly honorable intentions. So when beautiful Venetia Stratham boldly enters a gentlemen's club, demanding that Quinn stop courting her sister, he does what any bachelor would do: He kisses her. With her sharp wit, intoxicating passion, and surprising vulnerability, Venetia is irresistible—except for all this nonsense about threatening to shoot Quinn. But when clandestine enemies make an actual attempt on the earl's life, Venetia is implicated. To save her good name, Quinn does what any true gentleman must do: He proposes.

Thus Venetia finds herself wed to arrogant, wickedly sensual Quinn, whose devilish ways are as legendary as his rumored skills as a lover. Yet vexingly, her body rebels against her vow to remain immune to his many charms. If only she could reform the infuriating nobleman—without diminishing his undeniable allure. As Venetia discovers that a true rake is hard to tame, Quinn faces an even greater challenge: winning his wife's fragile trust . . . while defending both their lives.

Praise for *The Art of Taming a Rake*

“A sweet and tender romance with a perfect blend of adventure and mystery . . . The repartee between the two protagonists—both of whom are struggling to stay detached—is engaging verbal foreplay that captures the heat of their physical attraction. . . . Readers will yearn for the lovers to at last be able to devote their sincere and thoughtful attention to each other.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“[Jordan] adds just the right amount of danger and a large amount of passion in this well-written love story.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“Both sensuous and emotional, this story is a true pleasure.”—*BookPage*

“Jordan spices up the plot of her Regency romance with an intriguing thread of

danger, but longtime fans of this best-selling author needn't worry about a lack of potent passion, since Jordan also serves up plenty of the lushly sensual love scenes for which she is famous."—*Booklist*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Nicole Jordan is the *New York Times* bestselling author of numerous historical romances. She lives with her real-life hero (her husband) in the Rocky Mountains of Utah, where she is at work on her next enthralling tale about the sparks that fly when Regency lovers play the matrimonial mating game.

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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 to Tavistock Court 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 naïveté to another 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.

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 risqué 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 thus-far fruitless Faro game, Quinn narrowed his gaze on the masked beauty across the room. She had endeavored to remain unobtrusive, but she was much 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 a 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.

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