



Invitation to the Prince's Palace

By Jennie Adams

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Australian author **Jennie Adams** is a Waldenbooks bestseller and Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Award winner with a strong **International fanbase**. Jennie's stories are loved worldwide for their **Australian settings** and characters, lovable heroines, strong or wounded heroes, family themes, modern-day characters, emotion and warmth.

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'You're here. I expected to have to wait longer.' Melanie Watson tried not to sound too desperately relieved to see the cab driver, but she *was* relieved. She'd been saving money to try to start a new life away from her aunt, uncle and cousin. She still didn't have enough, but tonight she'd experienced very clearly just how soul-destroying it truly could be to live among people who postured rather than accepted, who used rather than loved.

The family's gloves had come off and Mel had made the choice to leave now whether she was quite financially ready, or not.

Mel had waited until her cousin had disappeared into her suite of rooms, and until her aunt and uncle had fallen into bed. She'd cleaned up every speck of the kitchen because she never left a job half done, and then she'd ordered a cab, left a note in her room, packed her life into suitcases and carried it to the kerb.

Mel tried to focus her gaze on a suburb painted in shades of silvery dawn. The sun would rise fully soon. The wispy chill would lift. Clarity and the new day would come and things would look better. If she could only stay awake and alert for that long.

She really felt quite odd right now, off kilter with an unpleasant buzzing in her head. She didn't exactly feel she might be about to faint, but.. she didn't feel right, that was for sure.

'It's a nice time for a drive. It'll be really quiet and peaceful.' That sounded hopeful, didn't it? At least a little bit positive and not overly blurry?

With the kind of anonymity born of speaking to a total stranger, Mel confided, 'I'm a bit under the weather. I had an allergic reaction earlier and I didn't get to take anything for it until just now. The medication is having a lot stronger impact on me than I thought it would.'

She'd got the treatment from her cousin's stash while Nicolette had seen off the last of the wealthy guests. Maybe Mel shouldn't have helped herself that way, but she'd been desperate.

Mel drew a breath and tried for a chirpy tone that emerged with an edge of exhaustion. 'But I'm ready to leave. Melbourne airport here we come.'

'I arrived earlier than anticipated so I'm grateful that you are ready.'

She thought he might have murmured, 'Grateful and somewhat surprised' before he went on.

'And I'm pleased to hear your enthusiasm despite the problem of allergies. Might I ask what caused them?'

The taxi driver's brows lifted as though he didn't quite know what to make of her.

Fair enough. *Mel* didn't know what to make of herself right now. She'd fulfilled her obligations, had pulled off all the beautiful desserts and other food for the dinner party despite harassment from her relatives and cleaned up afterwards when the party had finally ended.

Now she really needed her wits about her to leave, and they weren't co-operating. Instead, they wanted to fall asleep standing up. Like a tram commuter after a big day's work, or a girl who'd taken a maximum dose allergy pill on top of a night of no sleep and wheezing and swallowing back sneezes and getting a puffy face and puffy eyes.

'My cousin bought a new perfume. She sprayed it near me and off I went. Apparently I'm allergic to gardenias.' *Mel* dug for the remnants of her sense of humour. She knew it was still in there somewhere! 'Just don't give me any big bunches of those and I'm sure we'll be fine.'

'I will see to that. And you are right. It is a good time for a drive. The Melbourne cityscape is charming, even in pre-dawn light.' His words seemed so serious, and his gaze focused on her eyes, then on the spot where the dimple had come and gone in her cheek as she made her small joke. Would the dimple have offset her red nose and puffy face? Somehow *Mel* doubted it.

Mel focused on him, too. It was difficult not to because the man was top-to-toe gorgeous. Tall, a little over six feet to her five feet four and beautifully lean. *Mel* blinked to try to clear her drowsy vision.

He'd spoken in that lovely accent, too. French? No, but something European, *Mel* thought, to go with his tanned skin and black hair and the almost regal way he carried himself. He had lovely shoulders, just broad enough that a woman could run her hands over them to appreciate their beauty, or lay her head to rest there and know she could feel secure.

He wore an understated, expensive-looking suit. That was a bit unusual for a cab service, wasn't it? And his eyes—they weren't hazel or brown but a glorious deep blue.

'I just want to curl up.' Maybe that explained her reaction to him because his broad shoulders looked more appealing by the moment.

'Perhaps we'd better get your luggage loaded first, Nicol—' The rest of the word was drowned by the double beep of a car's unlocking device. He reached for the first two suitcases.

She must have given her full name of Nicole Melanie Watson when she booked the taxi. Since going to live with her aunt and uncle at age eight, *Mel* had only been known by her middle name. It felt strange to hear the first one again. Strange and a little shivery, because, even hearing only part of the word, his accent and the beautiful cadence of his voice made it sound special.

Oh, Mel. For goodness' sake.

'It's a pretty set of luggage. I like the floral design.' Was *Mel* making sense? She'd rescued the luggage when her cousin Nicolette had wanted to throw it out, but of course this man didn't need to hear that. And *she* didn't need to be quite so aware of him, either!

'You wouldn't lose the luggage easily. The design is quite distinctive.' He cast her a sideways glance. 'You are quite decided about this?'

'I'm decided.' Had he had people try to scam him out of fares? *Mel* would never do that. She knew what it

was like to try to live on a tight budget. Her aunt and uncle might be well off, but they'd never seen the need to do more than meet the basic costs of taking her in. Once she reached working age, they'd expected her to return their investment by providing cheap kitchen labour. For the sake of her emotional health, Mel had to consider any debt paid now. 'I won't change my mind.'

She glanced to where he'd parked and saw, rather than a taxicab, an unmarked car. The cab agency had said there was a shortage of cabs but she hadn't realised someone might come for her in their private car in their off-duty time. Wouldn't that be against company policy?

And the car was a really posh one, all sleek dark lines and perfectly polished. That didn't seem right for a cab driver, did it? How would he afford it? Mel frowned.

'Did you come straight from a formal dinner or something?' It must have been a really late night.

The words slipped out before she could censor them. The thought that followed worried her a little, but he'd have had sleep wouldn't he? He looked rested.

You 'll be perfectly safe with him, Mel. It won't be like—

She cut the thought off. That was a whole other cause of pain for Mel, and she didn't want to let it in. The night had been tough enough.

'Most dinners I attend are formal unless I have a night with my brothers.' Rikardo spoke decisively and yet. .his guest didn't look as he'd expected. She didn't...*seem* as he'd expected. Her openness and almost a sense of naivety...must be because she wasn't feeling well.

He tucked the odd thoughts away, and tucked his passenger into the front seat beside his. 'You may rest, if you wish. Perhaps by the time we arrive at the airport your allergy medication will have done its job and you'll be back to normal.'

'I doubt that. I feel as though I've been felled by elephant medicine.' She yawned again. 'Excuse me. I can't seem to stop.'

He'd collected a drowsy and puffy version of Sleeping Beauty. That was what Prince Rikardo Eduard Ettonbierre thought as the airport formalities ended and he carried Nicolette Watson onto the royal private jet and lowered her into a seat.

She'd slept most of the way to the airport and right through the boarding process. The medication had indeed got the better of her, but she was still very definitely...a sleeping beauty.

Despite the puffy face she seemed to have held her age well since the days when she'd been part of his university crowd during his time in Australia. She'd been two years behind him, but he'd known even then that Nicolette wanted to climb to the heights of social success.

Though their paths had not crossed since those days, Nicolette had made it a point to send Christmas cards, mark his birthday, invite him as her personal guest to various events, and in other ways to keep her name in front of him. Rik had felt awkward about that pursuit. He didn't really know what to say now, to explain his lack of response to all those overtures.

Perhaps it was better to leave that alone and focus on what they were about to achieve. He'd carefully considered several women for this task. In the end he'd chosen to ask Nicolette. He'd known there would be no chance he would fall for her romantically, and because of her ambitious nature he'd been confident she

would agree to the plan. She'd been the sensible choice.

Rik had been right about Nicolette. When he'd contacted her, she'd jumped at this opportunity to elevate her social status. And rather than someone closer by, who might continue to brush constantly through his social circles once this was all over, when their agreement ended, Rik could return Nicolette to Australia.

'You should have allowed me to carry her, Your Highness.' One of his bodyguards murmured the words not quite in chastisement, but in something close to it. 'Even driving a car by yourself to get her— You haven't given us sufficient information about...

Users Review

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