

TESSA DARE  
COURTNEY MILAN



THE  
*Dangerous*  
BOOK  
OF *Excerpts*

DARING HISTORICAL ROMANCE DEBUTS



The excerpts in this book come from the following sources.

*Goddess of the Hunt*

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*Surrender of a Siren*

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# TESSA DARE

*<http://www.tessadare.com>*



July, 2009

Dear Reader,

I can't tell you how excited I am to introduce you to Tessa Dare. I have been waiting for this day since . . . since . . . well, let's see. How long has it been? Our story doesn't quite start on October 27, 2006, at 7:59 PM (Pacific Time), but that's as good a start as any. On that day, I sent an e-mail that would, quite literally, change my life.

In that e-mail, I told Tessa that she was brilliant and talented, and that she was going to sell a book. I also asked Tessa if she wanted to critique with me.

In some ways, everything has changed since that day. When we first started critiquing together, neither of us had ever written a romance. Neither of us, in fact, really knew what was entailed in "critiquing" (and boy did we have a mountain of learning ahead of us). And neither of us knew precisely what we were getting into.

When you turn the next few pages, you'll find out for yourself that Tessa is an amazing writer. Her prose is lush and descriptive and her characters are achingly real. She will make you laugh and she'll make you choke up—sometimes even with the same sentence. As Tessa's critique partner, I read *Goddess of the Hunt* about eleventy billion times—but when Tessa gave me an ARC last month, I sat down, opened it up . . . and found myself immediately sucked into the story, unable to do anything but read the whole thing, again, for the eleventy billion and first time. It was every bit as good on the reread. I can't praise Tessa's writing enough.

But Tessa is also an amazing person. When I was going through an impossible time, Tessa flew across the country to comfort me. When a looming writing deadline coincided with

a job search, weeks before my wedding, Tessa called photographers for me.

In the years that we've known each other, we've been through a lot together. I now know that Tessa is generous and kind and giving. One thing that has never changed from that first e-mail is this: I still believe Tessa is brilliant and talented. The difference is that I no longer think she is going to sell a book. She's going to sell a lot of books.

I would say that I hope you enjoy Tessa's work as much as I do. But—to paraphrase her heroine, the inimitable Lucy Waltham, I have no talent for hoping. I don't hope. I *know*. I *believe*. I *expect*. I know you are going to love Tessa Dare. I believe you are going to tell all your friends about her. And I expect that you will find a place for her books—and her heroes and heroines—on your keeper shelf, and in your heart.

With fondest expectations,

*Courtney Milan*

# GODDESS OF THE HUNT

BY TESSA DARE

ON SALE JULY 28, 2009

**E**ver the bold adventuress, Lucy Waltham has decided to go hunting for a husband. But first she needs some target practice. So she turns to her brother's best friend, Jeremy Trescott, the Earl of Kendall, to hone her seductive wiles on him before setting her sights on another man. But her practice kisses spark a smoldering passion—one that could send all her plans up in smoke.

Jeremy has an influential title, a vast fortune, and a painful past, full of long-buried secrets. He keeps a safe distance from his own emotions, but to distract Lucy from her reckless scheming, he must give his passions free rein. Their sensual battle of wills is as maddening as it is delicious, but the longer he succeeds in managing the headstrong temptress, the closer Jeremy comes to losing control. When scandal breaks, can he bring himself to abandon Lucy to her ruin? Or will he risk his heart, and claim her for his own?

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"The sweetest,  
sexiest romance  
you'll read all year."  
—ELOISA JAMES

# GODDESS OF THE HUNT

☞ Tessa Dare ☞



A Novel

## CHAPTER ONE



AUTUMN, 1817

A knock on the door in the dead of night could only mean disaster.

Jeremy pulled a pair of worn breeches on under his nightshirt and stumbled toward the bedchamber door. A fire? He didn't smell smoke. Perhaps a Waltham family emergency? An urgent message from his steward, maybe—unrest at Corbinsdale would not come as a surprise.

A memory assailed him, unbidden. Unnerving. His heart thudded wildly in his chest. He paused, clutching the door handle, cursing his body for recalling so quickly what he'd worked long years to forget.

Logic caught up to his racing pulse, reining it in. The dim glow of banked coals cast ominous shadows, but Jeremy forced the room into focus. This was not that night. He was in his usual bedchamber at Waltham Manor, not wandering Corbinsdale woods. More than twenty years had passed, and

he was no longer a boy. Whatever surprise awaited him on the other side of the door, he was fully equipped to face it.

When he slid back the rusted bolt and wrenched open the door, Jeremy was prepared for the worst.

“Hold still,” came the whispered command.

He had an instant to register a feminine silhouette, a tangle of dark curls, and two hands grasping his shoulders. Then Lucy Waltham, the younger sister of his oldest friend, popped up on her toes and pressed her lips to his with such force, he stumbled against the doorjamb.

Good Lord. The girl was kissing him.

Well, he thought ironically, he’d been prepared for the worst. And of the many kisses Jeremy Trescott had experienced in his nine-and-twenty years, this was, undoubtedly, the worst.

Lucy kissed with her lips perfectly puckered and her eyes open wide. And if she lacked in finesse, she compensated with bold enthusiasm. Her hands were everywhere at once—tangling in his hair, skimming his shoulders, exploring the broad expanse of his chest.

This wasn’t a kiss. It was a siege.

Furthermore, it was incomprehensible, wholly illogical, and a dozen different shades of *wrong*.

Somehow Jeremy’s hands found their way to her elbows, and he wrested himself from her eager embrace. “Lucy! What the devil do you think you’re doing?”

“Shhhh.” Her eyes darted to either side, scanning the darkened corridor. Then her gaze tilted back up to his, narrowing with a disturbing intensity, and Jeremy fancied briefly—absurdly—that someone had painted a target on his face.

“I’m practicing,” she whispered, her fingers tightening over his arms. “Let me try one more time.”

She swooped up for another kiss, and he instinctively ducked, pulling her into the room and shutting the door behind them. In a more rational moment, it might have occurred to him that the impropriety of kissing his host’s sister in the corridor would only be compounded by yanking

her into his bedchamber. But Jeremy's faculties of reason had temporarily vacated Waltham Manor.

Lucy had, quite literally, kissed him witless.

"Did it work, then?"

He stared at her, mute with confusion. Did what work? At the moment, it seemed that nothing worked, least of all his brain. Shock had frozen his limbs. He certainly couldn't force an answer from his lips.

Stepping back, she crossed her arms over her crimson velvet dressing gown and surveyed his form boldly. As her gaze traveled downward, Jeremy grew uncomfortably aware of his own dishabille, from nightshirt to worn breeches to bare feet.

A satisfied smile spread across her face. "It must have worked. You did pull me into your bedchamber." She reached for the door handle. "Very well, Jemmy. I suppose that's enough practice. I'll see you at breakfast."

She cracked open the door. Jeremy put out a hand and slammed it shut.

Shooting him a glare, she grasped the handle with both hands and tugged. "I beg your pardon. I'll be on my way, then."

"No, you won't." He leaned his weight on the door, effectively bolting it closed. Lucy might be used to flouting her brother's half-hearted attempts at guardianship, but Jeremy had four inches and two stone on Henry Waltham, not to mention an iron will. Lucy did not walk all over him.

He mustered his most autocratic, Earl-of-Kendall tone. "You are not going anywhere. You're going to sit down and explain yourself." She opened her mouth to object. He grabbed her by the elbow and steered her toward a chair. "But first," he said, "I am going to have a drink."

She stopped struggling under his grip and dropped gracelessly into the chair. "A drink," she repeated. "Why didn't I think of that? A drink would be just the thing, thank you."

Shaking his head, Jeremy strode to the bar and poured a single glass of whiskey. He downed half the liquor

in one greedy swallow, closing his eyes to savor the burn spreading down his throat. When he opened them again, he looked around to assure himself this was, indeed, the same Waltham Manor he'd been visiting each autumn since Cambridge. Roughhewn beams scored the sloping ceiling. Muted tapestries covered the walls, and an unfussy, timeworn carpet obliged his bare feet. The room had not altered in the past eight years, any more than it likely had in the past one hundred.

In decor, in landscape, in the quartet of old friends enjoying their annual sporting holiday—Waltham Manor had remained a welcome constant in Jeremy's life. Until this year, when everything had changed.

"Why couldn't everything just go on as it was?" Lucy stirred the fire with a poker, sending swirls of agitated sparks into the air. "Why did Felix have to go and get married? He's ruined everything."

Jeremy drowned his reply with a sip of his drink. He would not have admitted it, but he rather agreed.

"It was all right when Henry got married," she continued. "Marianne's so busy with the children, at least she stays out of the way. But that shrew Felix married is going to expect to be entertained. And to make it all worse, she's brought along her sister, that Sophia."

"Mrs. Crowley-Cumberbatch and Miss Hathaway are, by all accounts, charming young ladies. One would think you'd be glad of their company."

She threw him an incredulous look.

"Or not." Truth be told, Jeremy wasn't glad of their presence, either. There was nothing precisely offensive about Felix's wife, Kitty, or her sister, Sophia. To the contrary, Sophia Hathaway was the epitome of an inoffensive, well-bred society beauty. A bit of meringue—insubstantial, but pleasing enough, if one's tastes ran to sweet. As Toby's apparently did.

Jeremy tossed back another swallow of whiskey and tasted the irony. Henry and Felix married, Toby on the verge . . . their bachelor's retreat had become a family house

party. Well, if all his friends were determined to shackle themselves in marriage, at least he would be in no imminent danger of joining them. All three ladies at Waltham Manor were safely accounted for.

The sound of fingers drumming wood interrupted his thoughts. "Do you intend to drink the whole bottle yourself?"

Unless, of course, one counted Lucy.

And he did not count Lucy. She was neither eligible nor a lady. She was Henry's much younger sister and ward, and she was Jeremy's personal version of a biblical plague. She'd spent years devising ways to get under his skin. Now she was charging into his bedchamber and . . . and *practicing*.

Much as he wished to erase that kiss from his memory, he couldn't ignore it. Neither could he ignore the obvious implications of that word, "practicing."

He could, however, ignore her request for a drink. Jeremy refilled his own glass and carried it toward the hearth, dropping into the chair opposite hers. Raking a hand through his hair, he exhaled slowly. "I don't like to ask this. I dread your response. But for what, exactly, are you practicing?"

"Not 'what,' " she answered. "Who."

Oh, it only got worse. "For *whom* are you practicing, then? Some local youth? The vicar's boy?"

"For Toby, of course."

He gave a wry laugh. "For Toby? Why would you be kissing Toby? He's all but engaged to Miss Hathaway."

She hugged her knees to her chest, curling into a ball of red velvet and chestnut curls. The chair's masculine proportions dwarfed her, and her green eyes brimmed with raw, undisguised hurt. "Then it's true."

Bloody hell. Suddenly this bizarre nighttime visit made sense. Jeremy punched the arm of his chair. Of all the irretrievably stupid things to say.

"My maid said she heard it from Toby's valet. I didn't want to believe her. I *couldn't* believe her. But it's true."

Jeremy had to look away. It was a matter of self-preservation. Lucy's countenance was a collection of pixie features set within a heart-shaped face—a face designed to display, unfiltered, every emotion of the heart within. One couldn't look at her without knowing exactly how she was feeling, and Jeremy didn't wish to know how Lucy was feeling. He preferred to keep a respectful distance from even his own emotions.

“How could he?” she squeaked.

Jeremy winced. Lucy sniffed loudly, and he took another slow sip of whiskey. She could not cry, he wanted to remind her. That was the rule—Henry's single exercise in authority. He'd allowed the chit to run rough-shod over them every autumn, tagging along on their hunting and fishing excursions, parroting their curses, even taking nips off their flasks—under one condition. Lucy was not to cry. In eight years, he had never seen her shed a single tear. He prayed she wasn't about to start now. If there was one thing he couldn't abide, it was a crying woman.

He stole a glance at her. Damn it, her chin was quivering. “You're not going to start weeping, are you?”

“No.” Her voice quivered, too.

Jeremy busied himself adding wood to the fire, stalling for time.

Curse Toby. This was all his fault. He'd always made such a pet of the girl. Every autumn, Lucy clung to Toby like a tick on a hound. He baited her hooks and taught her bawdy Latin conjugations. He brought her flowers and wove her crowns of ivy that went straight to her head. His Diana, Toby called her. Goddess of the hunt.

Goddess he may have dubbed her, but the worship was all on Lucy's side. A young girl's harmless infatuation—that was all it had seemed. Obviously, to Lucy it had seemed much more. And now the task of disabusing her of all those romantic notions had somehow fallen to Jeremy. Just his luck. But also fitting, he supposed. If he'd ever harbored a romantic notion, which was doubtful, he'd been disabused of it long ago.

He clapped the dust from his hands and reclined in his chair. In his most magnanimous tone, he began, "Now, Lucy, you must understand . . ."

"Don't, Jemmy. Don't you dare speak to me as if I were a child. I ought to have come out two seasons ago. If only Marianne weren't perpetually confined. Perhaps I am not a genteel lady like Sophia Hathaway. But I'm not a girl any longer, either."

She stretched a bare foot toward the fire and absently flexed her ankle. The sinuous grace of the motion caught Jeremy's gaze. Caught it, and trapped it. He couldn't look away. She circled her foot idly, her skin glowing golden in the firelight. His eyes swept upward, tracing the sweet curve of her calf to where it disappeared under her dressing gown.

Then Lucy shifted, crossing her legs. Red velvet fell like a theater curtain, abruptly ending the show. A swift blow of disappointment caught Jeremy in the chest. The sensation drifted downward, mellowing to the familiar ache of thwarted desire. God, this night was simply rife with surprises.

"I suppose you're not," he muttered, tearing his gaze away and giving himself a mental shake. "Very well, let us speak as adults. You can begin by dropping that childish nickname and addressing me in a proper fashion."

"You mean by your title? I don't even remember your old one, let alone the new." She looked up at the ceiling. "You can't possibly expect me to call you 'my lord,' Jemmy."

Jeremy sighed, abandoning any effort to soothe. "Then let us be perfectly plain. Toby is going to marry Miss Hathaway."

"But he can't! It isn't fair!"

He snorted. "Spoken like a girl, Lucy."

She ignored him. "I've always known I would marry Sir Toby Aldridge, ever since the day we first met."

"That's absurd. The day you first met, you were twelve years old."

"Eleven."

"Eleven, then. And Toby shot at you."

"He didn't shoot at me. He shot at a partridge I startled. He didn't know I was there, because—"

"Because you were following us after Henry forbade you," Jeremy finished impatiently. "Yes, yes. I remember it clearly."

*Too clearly*, he added in silence. He remembered everything about that day in painful detail. The glaring afternoon sun, the acrid odor of gunpowder. But he especially remembered the sounds. How could he forget? A frantic staccato of wingbeats, the crack of Toby's gun, a piercing shriek. The dreadful silence as all four of them charged through knee-deep brambles, only to find Lucy sitting in a clearing, unharmed and unrepentant.

Ensuing years had proven that near miss to be the beginning of a pattern. Lucy Waltham was always flirting with disaster, and therefore Jeremy had always avoided Lucy. He didn't want to be in the vicinity when disaster inevitably struck.

With a sniff, she reached out and took the glass of whiskey from his hand. Her fingertips grazed his wrist. So much for safe distances.

She rested her chin on one knee and stared morosely into the amber-brown liquid. "What does Sophia Hathaway have that I haven't?"

"Besides impeccable breeding, accomplishment, and a dowry of twenty thousand pounds?" He extended his hand to retrieve his drink.

She downed a generous swallow of whiskey before relinquishing the glass. "She doesn't love him."

"More girlish fancies. This is marriage. Love is hardly required. They get on well enough, and their families will approve. She has wealth but no title; he is a baronet. It's a fortuitous match for them both."

"*Fortuitous?*" She narrowed her eyes. "Only you would speak of marriage as a prudent business arrangement."

“It isn’t only me. It’s society. Love matches like your brother’s—they are the exception, not the rule. Ladies who insist on romance end up disappointed. You’d realize the truth of this, if only you—”

“If only I what? If only I were cold and jaded, like you?”

Jeremy clenched his jaw. “If only you had paid the slightest attention to any of those governesses Henry hired for you. If only you’d had some model of female behavior, aside from an overburdened sister-in-law and a senile aunt. If only you had a modicum of sense.”

“If only I were like Sophia Hathaway.”

“You said it. Not me.”

She crossed her arms. “Well, I don’t care what you—or society—say. I’m going to marry for love, and that means I won’t marry anyone but Toby. I refuse to believe he could marry anyone other than me. He loves me. I know it, even if he doesn’t yet.”

“Lucy, the matter is all but settled. I expect he will propose any day.”

“Then I shall have to act tonight.” She rose from the chair and began pacing the floor. Her brow was furrowed, and she toyed absently with a lock of her hair, catching it between her teeth. It was a warning sign he’d learned to heed. Lucy always fidgeted with her hair when she was scheming.

She usually wore her hair up—for convenience, not fashion. But they hadn’t yet invented the hairpin or bonnet that could contain Lucy’s curls. They were forever working loose at the edges and winding between her fingers, finding their way to her lips. Now her hair fell in heavy waves down to her waist, rippling like a thick, luxurious pelt as she prowled the carpet’s knotted fringe. She turned and swept back across the room, fluid fabric wrapping around her curves.

*Curves.* Great God. When had Lucy grown curves? Lucy was always a collection of bony, awkward angles, held together by sheer force of will. Now that hard frame of

determination was cloaked in soft, supple, womanly curves. And she *and* her curves were parading about his bedchamber in a state of undress. At the ungodly hour of—he stole a glance at the clock on the mantel—two o’clock. The impropriety of the entire situation struck him with sudden force.

“You shouldn’t be here. It’s late, and you’re . . . upset. Go back to your room and get some sleep. We can speak more on this tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow may be too late,” she said. “I can’t take that risk. I’ll have to do it tonight.”

“You’ll have to do what tonight?”

“Seduce him, of course.”

Jeremy stared at her, dumbstruck. A log settled in the fire with a loud crack, and a flurry of red sparks shot out from the hearth.

Lucy stopped before the mirror. She untied her dressing gown and opened it, surveying the simple linen nightgown beneath with a dissatisfied expression. “Silk and lace would be better, I suppose, but I haven’t anything finer.” She made a quarter turn and looked askance at her reflected profile. Thrusting her shoulders back, she smoothed her nightgown tight against her torso until every swell and peak of her flesh strained against the sheer fabric.

Jeremy leapt to his feet, upending what remained of his whiskey onto the carpet. In a matter of two paces, he crossed the room and stepped between Lucy and her scandalous reflection, grabbing the edges of her dressing gown and wrapping them firmly about her waist. The third button of her nightgown was undone, and the thin fabric gaped to reveal a crescent of golden skin. He forced his gaze up to her face. “Don’t tell me that . . . that this is what you’re practicing.”

She nodded. The cool intensity in her gaze told Jeremy that, ridiculous as the idea might seem to him, Lucy thought seduction an entirely sensible plan. He put his hands on her shoulders and willed authority into his voice. “Lucy, Toby does not love you.”

“Yes, Jemmy, he does.”

“What makes you so sure? Has he given you any reason to hope?”

“I wasn’t aware that hope required a reason, any more than love. In case you have forgotten—I have no talent for hoping. I don’t hope. I *know*. I *believe*. I *expect*. I know that Toby loves me. I believe we belong together.” She jabbed a finger into the center of his chest. “And I expect you to understand.”

Jeremy groaned. How was he supposed to reason with a girl—a *woman*, he corrected—who put no stock in reasons? “Lucy, Toby is quite fond of you.” He realized he was still holding her by the shoulders. Retreating a step, he let his hands drop to his sides. “But fondness isn’t love. Besides, what would you know of seduction?”

“Oh, I have a book.”

“A *book*?” He pulled a hand through his hair. “Good Lord, Lucy, I am not going to ask you where you obtained such a book or what pearls of wisdom it might contain.” She opened her mouth to interject, and he silenced her with an outstretched hand. “In fact, I beg you *not* to tell me. Suffice it to say, I hope you will not heed the lessons of whatever lurid novel you’ve managed to get your hands on.”

“I’ll admit book learning has its limitations.” She regarded him cagily, her gaze searching his.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

She inched closer. “Reading is certainly no substitute for practical experience.” She drew nearer still.

“But . . . wait . . . Lucy, you can’t possibly—” And then he blurted out a question directed more at God in heaven than at Lucy herself. “Why me?”

“You mean besides the fact that there’s no one else? You’re so proper, Jemmy, so cold. There are icebergs in the North Sea with less frost on them. If I can thaw you out, I’ll have no problem seducing Toby.”

“I assure you, you could not ‘thaw’ me, even if I wished to be . . . thawed. Which I don’t.” He retreated a step. Then two.

"Try to resist, by all means. I like a good challenge." She closed the distance again, her eyes lit with mischief. "I've learned to snare grouse and angle for trout. Is catching a husband really so different?"

Yes, Jeremy meant to insist, but somehow his jaw would only move up and down noiselessly, in a rather good imitation of—well, of a trout.

And then she caught him by his shirt and reeled him in, catching him up in that net of chestnut curls and kissing him within an inch of his life. Her lips attacked his with the same steely determination. But when she threw her arms around his neck and fell against him, the rest of her was soft, pliant, yielding. Silky strands of her hair slid over his forearm. Lush curves molded against his chest.

Before he could gather his wits to protest, she pulled away suddenly and studied his face.

"Well? Is it working?"

It was a simple question. And as Jeremy's mind recited the reasons why his answer ought to be an emphatic *no*, other regions of his body were decidedly saying *yes*. Good Lord, he was only a man. A man who, it seemed, had wasted the past several months not kissing anyone, and whose body was veritably leaping at the chance to end the reign of self-imposed monasticism. He shook his head firmly in the negative, hoping she would overlook the ragged breathing that argued otherwise.

Lucy was undeterred. She shot up for yet another attempt, but Jeremy caught her face in his hands. Her cheeks flushed soft and warm beneath his palms.

"Have you gone mad? This is not going to happen. It cannot happen."

"Well, of course *it* cannot happen." Her mouth spread into an grin, and her cheeks dimpled under his thumbs. Jeremy was seized by an unpardonable urge to trace those little laughing hollows with his fingers, explore them with his lips.

"Have no fear, Jemmy, I have no plans for *it*. Then *you* would have to marry me, and that would not do at all."

"It most certainly would not." He studied the face cupped in his hands. Her skin drank in the firelight and glowed like burnished gold. Her eyes danced with reflected flame, daring him to look closer, draw nearer.

Who was this woman, and what had she done with Lucy? She felt like a stranger to him, and that was a dangerous thing. A stranger was fair game, for kissing . . . and more.

Jeremy began a short list of the reasons why Lucy was not—most definitely *not*—fair game.

Point one, she was the sister of his oldest friend.

Point two, his oldest friend was a crack shot.

"Listen to me," he said, giving her head a little shake. "If you have questions about . . . about the marriage bed, you ought to take them up with Marianne. Or you should wait for your wedding night, when your husband—who will not be Toby—can enlighten you. There will be no lessons on fishing for husbands or ensnaring men."

She smiled. A smug, maddening smile that Jeremy longed to shake right off her face.

"Do you understand me?" he demanded.

"Yes." She pressed her lips together briefly before they parted again in laughter.

"Then damn it, why are you laughing?"

"Because I think it *was* working."

That damned impish grin again. But this time he saw not the impudent smile, but rather what comprised it.

Lips.

Full, sweetly bowed lips, flushed deep red with kissing and laughter. Lips that begged to be covered with his own.

He closed his eyes to the temptation, sliding his hands back to fist in her tumbled hair, as if by taming those curls he could control her. Control himself. But—sweet heaven. It was like plunging his hands into liquid silk, and behind his eyelids he saw those strands of exquisite softness stroking every inch of his skin.

His eyes snapped open. In desperation, he glanced downward, just to see if the third button of her nightgown was still undone.

And it was. Damn it, it was.

She laughed softly, drawing his gaze back up to her mouth, now tilted at the perfect angle to receive his kiss. Those lips . . . and just a hint of a moist, pink tongue . . . the instruments of his irritation for so many years, now offered up in invitation. Just waiting to be silenced, mastered, tamed. There was one certain way, a dark voice inside him argued, to make Lucy finally see sense.

*Kiss her senseless.*

His mouth crushed down on hers, and he felt her lips contract from that wide smile to a passionate pout. And when she opened her mouth to him readily, eagerly, Jeremy thanked God for lurid novels.

He slid his tongue into her hot, whiskey-bold mouth, exploring, demanding. She gasped against his lips, and he thrust deeper, took more, determined to drink in her sweetness until he tasted the bitter edge of fear. If she wanted lessons, he meant to give her one. He would teach her that desire was not a game; passion was dangerous sport indeed. He meant to push her until he pushed her away—sent her scurrying back to her room to tremble beneath crisp white sheets and curl back into that high-necked virgin nightgown. And button that damned button.

Then her tongue stroked his. Cautiously, once. Again, with abandon. She was pulling him in, coaxing him on, stoking the fire in his loins with every darting caress. He answered instinctively, deepening the kiss. And a realization pierced him with all the sweet sting of requited desire.

This kiss was a dare.

And in the eight years he'd known her, Lucy Waltham had never once backed down from a dare.

She wriggled closer, grasping his shoulders and running one hand to the back of his neck. He growled as her fingernails raked lightly across his nape.

Some force pulled his hand downward. Regret, perhaps. The desperate need to regain control. A charitable impulse, truly—he had to convince her she was playing with fire. Fingers splayed, he laid claim to the small of her back and pressed her to him, drawing her body tight against his swelling groin. The pleasure was immediate. Intense. Not nearly enough.

Surely now she would squirm away, perhaps even scream.

But no. She was moving, yes. God, was she moving. Arching against him, moaning into the kiss. Cool velvet teased his fingertips; warm velvet caressed his tongue. Traitorous images flooded his mind. A crimson robe pooling on the floor. Buttons flying everywhere. He was in this kiss far too deep, and oh God, how he longed to sink in deeper still. It had gone all wrong.

This was . . . all . . . *wrong*.

Jeremy fought through the haze of lust, clenching his fist in her hair and tearing her away. An inch. He looked down at her face. This time, her eyes were closed.

“Lucy,” he whispered hoarsely.

Her eyes fluttered open. They were green flecked with gold; dark, wild passion, glinting with laughter. He untangled his hand from her hair, released her waist, and stepped back, trying to think.

His breath was ragged, his pulse thundering, and blood was rushing everywhere in his body except his brain. “Lucy,” he tried again, “that was—”

“That was practice,” she interrupted. A smile curved her lips. “Very good practice.” She shifted her weight back on one foot, pushing the curve of her hip into relief and lifting her breasts for attention—an unconscious motion of raw sensuality.

It was wildly seductive.

Jeremy swore inwardly. What had he done? He’d opened the door to an awkward virgin, and not a half-hour later, he was sending away a temptress. It was as though he’d been handed an unloaded gun, only to pack it with

powder and buckshot and—dear God—damn near pull the trigger. Scant minutes ago, she'd been harmless. Now . . .

Now Lucy was a danger to herself.

And if she stood there a moment longer, taunting him with those glittering eyes and those swollen lips and that flushed, kissable curve of her throat, Jeremy would be a danger to her.

What had he been thinking? He had mauled her like a brute. Never mind the fact that she had mauled him right back, or that the whole thing had been her idea. He was a gentleman, and she was—by birth if not behavior—a lady. She was his best friend's *sister*. He ought to be facing a pistol at dawn, or worse. A vicar across an altar.

She must have read the guilt in his eyes. "For heaven's sake, Jemmy. Henry's never going to know, unless you tell him." Smiling, she tied the sash of her dressing gown. "And I strongly suggest you don't. You'd never live it down."

"You," he said, grasping her by the elbow and steering her firmly to the door, "are very late for bed." He cautiously scanned the corridor before guiding her through the doorway. She started to turn left, toward Toby's bedchamber. He caught her by the shoulders and swiveled her to face the opposite direction.

"Go to your room, Lucy," he whispered sternly. "I shall keep my door open all night—if you try to get to Toby, you'll have to get through me."

She flashed him a coy look which, in any ballroom, he would have taken for shameless flirtation. She was a quick study, indeed. "Are you suggesting that would be difficult?"

He gritted his teeth. "So help me, I will march you down to Henry's room this instant if . . ."

"Shhhh." She silenced him with a finger to his lips, glancing over her shoulder. "Very well, Jemmy," she whispered. "I suppose Toby will let Sophia unpack her valises before he drops to one knee. I can wait one more night."

Jeremy listened to her pad softly down the corridor and strained his ears until he heard the sound of a bolt sliding into place. He sagged against the wall.

It was some comfort to know Lucy slept behind a bolted door. But Jeremy would have felt entirely more at peace, were the bolt on the other side.

# SURRENDER OF A SIREN

BY TESSA DARE

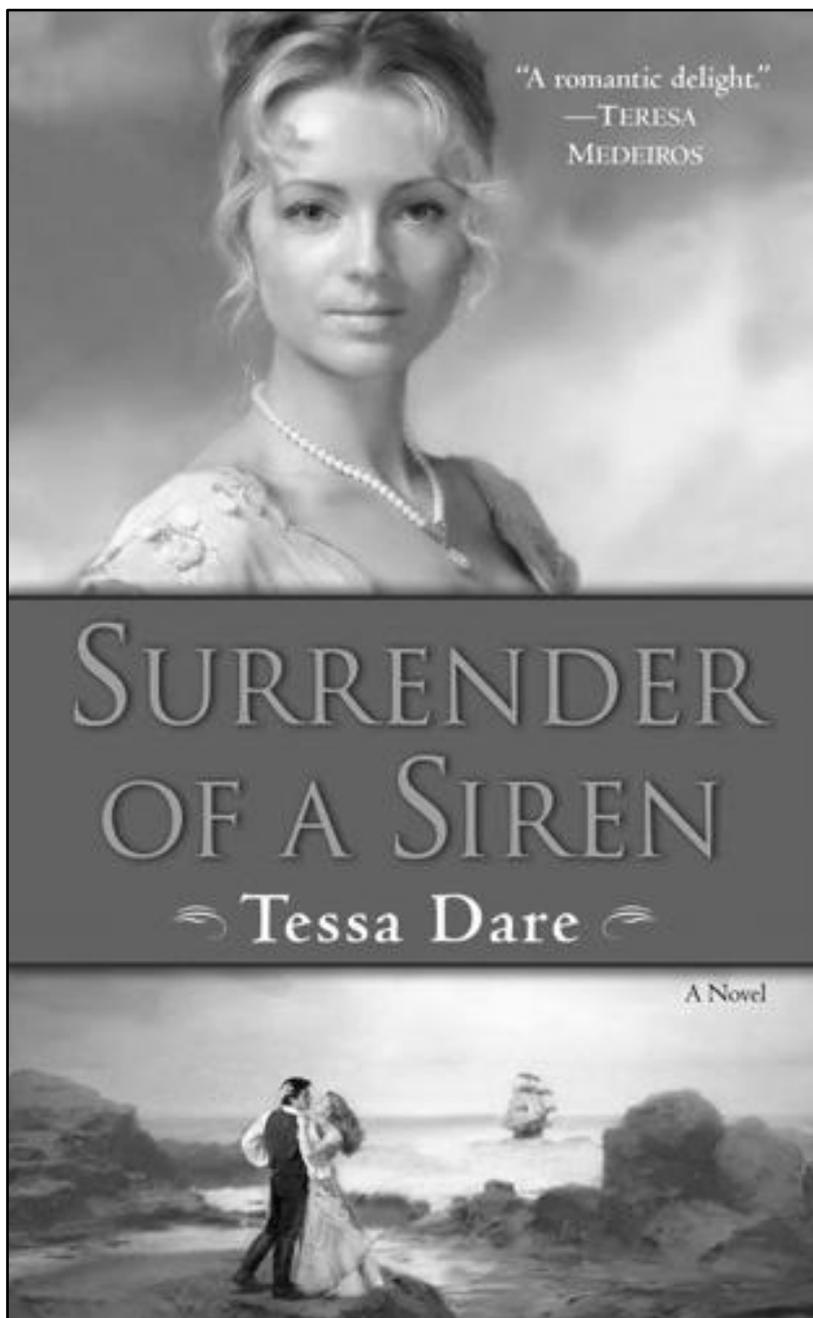
ON SALE AUGUST 25, 2009

**D**esperate to escape a loveless marriage and society's constraints, pampered heiress Sophia Hathaway jilts her groom, packs up her paints and sketchbook, and assumes a new identity, posing as a governess to secure passage on the Aphrodite. She wants a life of her own: unsheltered, unconventional, uninhibited. But it's one thing to sketch all her wildest, most wanton fantasies, and quite another to face the dangerously handsome libertine who would steal both her virtue and her gold.

To any well-bred lady, Benedict "Gray" Grayson is trouble in snug-fitting boots. A conscienceless scoundrel who sails the seas for pleasure and profit, Gray lives for conquest—until Sophia's perception and artistry stir his heart. Suddenly, he'll brave sharks, fire, storm, and sea just to keep her at his side. She's beautiful, refined, and ripe for seduction. Could this counterfeit governess be a rogue's redemption? Or will the runaway heiress's secrets destroy their only chance at love?

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## CHAPTER ONE



GRAVESEND, DECEMBER 1817

**I**n fleeing the society wedding of the year, Sophia Hathaway knew she would be embracing infamy.

She'd neglected to consider how infamy *smelled*.

She paused in the doorway of the fetid dockside tavern. Even from here, the stench of soured ale accosted her, forcing bile into her throat.

A burly man elbowed her aside as he went out the door. "Watch yerself, luv."

She pasted herself against the doorjamb, wondering at the singular form of address implied in "luv." The man's comment had clearly been directed toward *both* of her breasts.

With a shiver, she wrapped her cloak tight across her chest.

Taking one last deep breath, she sidled her way into the dank, drunken confusion, forbidding her gray serge skirts to brush against anything. Much less *anyone*. From every murky corner—and for a squared-off tea caddy of a building, this tavern abounded in murky corners—eyes followed her. Suspicious, leering eyes, set in hard, unshaven faces. It was enough to make any young woman anxious. For a fugitive young lady of quality, traveling alone, under the flimsy shield of a borrowed cloak and a fabricated identity . . .

Well, it was almost enough to make Sophia reconsider the whole affair.

An unseen someone jostled her from behind. Her gloved fingers instinctively clutched the envelope secreted in her cloak. She thought of its brethren, the letters she'd posted just that morning, breaking her engagement and ensuring a scandal of Byronic proportions. Seeds of irrevocable ruin, scattered with the wind.

A cold sense of destiny anchored her rising stomach. There was no going back now. She could walk through far worse than this shabby pub, if it meant leaving her restrictive life behind. She could even endure these coarse men ogling her breasts, so long as they did not glimpse the secret strapped between them.

Her resolve firmed, Sophia caught the eye of a baldheaded man wiping a table with a greasy rag. He looked harmless enough—or at least, too old to strike quickly. She smiled at him. He returned the gesture with a completely toothless grin.

Her own smile faltering, she ventured, "I'm looking for Captain Grayson."

"'Course you is. All the comely ones are." The gleaming pate jerked. "Gray's in the back."

She followed the direction indicated, moving through the crowd on tiptoe in an effort to keep her hem off the floor. The sticky floorboards sucked at her half boots. Toward the

back of the room, she spied a boisterous knot of men and women near the bar. One man stood taller than the others, his auburn hair looking cleaner than that of his company. A brushed felt beaver rested on the bar nearby, an oddly refined ornament for this seedy den.

As Sophia angled for a better view, a chair slid out from a nearby table, clipping her in the knee. She bobbed on tiptoe for a moment before tripping forward. The hem of her cloak caught on her boot, and the cloak wrenched open, exposing her chest and throat to the sour, wintry air. In her desperate attempt to right herself, she clutched wildly for the wall—

And grasped a handful of rough linen shirt instead.

The shirt's owner turned to her. "Hullo there, chicken," he slurred, his breath rancid with decay. His liquor-glazed eyes slid over her body and settled on the swell of her breasts. "Fancy bit of goods you are. By looks, I would have priced you beyond my pocket, but if you's offerin' . . ."

Had he mistaken her for some dockside trollop? Sophia's tongue curled with disgust. Perhaps she was disguised in simple garments, but certainly she did not look *cheap*.

"I am not offering," she said firmly. She tried to wriggle away, but with a quick move, he had her pinned against the bar.

"Hold there, lovely. Jes' a little tickle, then."

His grimy fingers dove into the valley of her bosom, and Sophia yelped. "Unhand me, you . . . you revolting brute!"

The brute released one of her arms to further his lascivious exploration, and Sophia used her newly-freed hand to beat him about the head. No use. His fingers squirmed between her breasts like fat, greedy worms burrowing in the dark.

"Stop this," she cried, making her hand a fist and clouting his ear, to no avail. Her efforts at defense only amused her drunken attacker.

“S’all right,” he said, chuckling. “I likes my girls with plenty o’pluck.”

Desperation clawed at her insides. It wasn’t simply the insult of this lout’s hands on her breasts that had her panicking. She’d forfeited her genteel reputation the moment she left home. But his fingers groped closer and closer to the one thing she dared not surrender. If he found it, Sophia doubted she would escape this tavern with her life intact, much less her virtue.

Her attacker turned his head, angling for a better look down her dress. His grimy ear was just inches from her mouth. Within snapping distance. If she bit it hard enough, she might startle him into letting her go. She had all but made up her mind to do it, when she inhaled another mouthful of his rank sweat and paused. If her choices were putting her mouth on this repulsive beast or dying, she just might rather die.

In the end, she didn’t do either.

The repulsive beast gave a yawp of surprise as a pair of massive hands bodily hauled him away. Lifted him, actually, as though the brute weighed nothing, until he writhed in the air above her like a fish on a hook.

“Come now, Bains,” said a smooth, confident baritone, “You know better than that.”

With an easy motion, her rescuer tossed Bains aside. The brute landed some feet away, with the crunch of splintering wood.

Sagging against the bar with relief, Sophia peered up at her savior. It was the tall, auburn- haired gentleman she’d spied earlier. At least, she assumed him to be a gentleman. His accent bespoke education, and with his dark- green topcoat, fawn- colored trousers, and tasseled Hessians, he cut a fashionable silhouette. But as his arms flexed, the finely tailored clothing delineated raw, muscled power beneath.

And there was nothing refined about his face. His features were rough- hewn, his skin bronzed by the sun. It was impossible not to stare at the golden, weathered hue

and wonder— did it fade at his cravat? At his waist? Not at all?

The more she peered up the man, the less she knew what to make of him. He had a gentleman's attire, a laborer's body . . . and the wide, sensuous mouth of a scoundrel.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Bains? That's no way to touch a woman." His words were addressed to the lout on the floor, but his roguish gaze was fixed on her. Then he smiled, and the lazy quirk of his lips tugged a thin scar slanting from his jaw to his mouth.

Oh yes, that mouth was dangerous indeed.

At that moment, Sophia could have kissed it.

"The proper way to touch a woman," he continued, sauntering to her side and propping an elbow on the bar, "is to come at her from the side, like so." In an attitude of perfect nonchalance, he leaned his weight on his arm and slid it along the bar until his knuckles came within a hair's width of her breast.

Mouth of a scoundrel, indeed! Sophia's gratitude quickly turned to indignation. Had this man truly yanked one lout off her just so he could grope her himself? Apparently so. His hand rested so close to her breast, her flesh heated in the shadow of his fingers. So close, her skin prickled, anticipating the rough texture of his touch. She wished he *would* touch her, end the excruciating uncertainty, and give her an excuse to slap the roguish smirk from his face.

"See?" he said, wagging his fingers in the vicinity of her bosom. "This way you don't startle her off."

Coarse laughter rumbled through the assembled crowd. Retracting his hand, the scoundrel lifted his voice.

"Don't I have the right of it, Megs?"

All eyes turned to a curvy redhead gathering tankards. Megs barely looked up from her work as she sang out, "Ain't no one like Gray knows how to touch a lady."

Laughter swept the tavern again, louder this time.

Even Bains chuckled.

*Gray.* Sophia's heart plummeted. What was it the bald man had said, when she asked for Captain Grayson? *Gray's in the back.*

"One last thing to remember, Bains," Gray continued. "The least you can do is buy the lady a drink." As the tavern-goers returned to their carousing, he turned his arrogant grin on Sophia. "What are you having, then?"

She blinked at him.

*What was she having?* Sophia knew exactly what she was having. She was having colossally bad luck.

This well-dressed mountain of insolence looming over her was Captain Grayson, of the brig *Aphrodite*. And the brig *Aphrodite* was the sole ship bound for Tortola until next week. For Sophia, next week might as well have been next year. She needed to leave for Tortola. She needed to leave now. Therefore, she needed this man—or rather, this man's *ship*—to take her.

"What, no outpouring of gratitude?" He cast a glance toward Bains, who was lumbering up from the floor. "I suppose you think I should have beat him to a pulp. I could have. But then, I don't like violence. It always ends up costing me money. And pretty thing that you are"—his eyes skipped over her as he motioned to the barkeep—"before I went to that much effort, I think I'd at least need to know your name, Miss . . . ?"

Sophia gritted her teeth, marshalling all her available forbearance. She needed to leave, she reminded herself. She needed this man. "Turner. Miss Jane Turner."

"Miss . . . Jane . . . Turner." He teased the syllables out, as if tasting them on his tongue. Sophia had always thought her middle name to be the dullest, plainest syllable imaginable. But from his lips, even "Jane" sounded indecent.

"Well, Miss *Jane* Turner. What are you drinking?"

"I'm not drinking anything. I'm looking for you, *Captain* Grayson. I've come seeking passage on your ship."

"On the *Aphrodite*? To Tortola? Why the devil would you want to go there?"

"I'm a governess. I'm to be employed, near Road Town." The lies rolled effortlessly off her tongue. As always.

His eyes swept her from bonnet to half boots, stroking an unwelcome shiver down to her toes. "You don't look like any governess I've ever seen." His gaze settled on her hands, and Sophia quickly balled them into fists.

*The gloves.* Curse her vanity. Her maid's old dress and cloak served well for disguise—their dark, shapeless folds could hide a multitude of sins. But as she'd dressed herself for the first time in her life that morning, her fingers shook with nerves and cold, and Sophia had assuaged their trembling with this one indulgence, her best pair of black kid gloves, fastened with tiny black pearl buttons and lined with sable.

They were not the gloves of a governess.

For a moment, Sophia feared he would see the truth. Balderdash, she chided herself. No one ever looked at her and saw the truth. People saw what they wanted to see . . . the obedient daughter, the innocent maiden, the society belle, the blushing bride. This merchant captain was no different. He would see a passenger, and the promise of coin.

Long ago, she'd learned this key to deceit. It was easy to lie, once you understood that no one really wanted the truth.

"Lovely, aren't they? They were a gift." With a gloved flourish, she held out her letter. The envelope bore the wear and marks of a transatlantic voyage. "My offer of employment, if you'd care to examine it." She sent up a quick prayer that he would not. "From a Mr. Waltham of Eleanora plantation."

"Waltham?" He laughed, waving away the letter.

Sophia pocketed it quickly.

"Miss Turner, you've no idea what trials you're facing. Never mind the dangers of an ocean crossing, the tropical poverty and disease . . . George Waltham's brats are a plague upon the earth. One your delicate nature and fine gloves are unlikely to survive."

"You know the family, then?" Sophia kept her tone light, but inwardly she loosed a flurry of curses. She'd never considered the possibility that this merchant captain could claim an acquaintance with the Walthams.

"Oh, I know Waltham," he continued. "We grew up together. Our fathers' plantations shared a boundary. He was older by several years, but I paced him for mischief well enough."

Sophia swallowed a groan. Captain Grayson not only *knew* Mr. Waltham—they were friends and neighbors! All her plans, all her carefully tiered lies . . . this bit of information shuffled them like a deck of cards.

He continued, "And you're traveling alone, with no chaperone?"

"I can look after myself."

"Ah, yes. And I tossed Bains across the room just now for my own amusement. It's a little game we seamen like to play."

"I can look after myself," she insisted. "If you'd waited another moment, that revolting beast would be missing an ear."

He gave her a deep, scrutinizing look that made her feel like a turned-out glove, all seams and raw edges. She breathed steadily, fighting the blush creeping up her cheeks.

"Miss Turner," he said dryly, "I'm certain in that fertile female imagination of yours, you think sailing off to the West Indies will be some grand, romantic adventure." He drawled the phrase in a patronizing tone, but Sophia wasn't certain he meant to deride *her*. Rather, she surmised, his tone communicated a general weariness with adventure.

How sad.

"Fortunately," he continued, "I've never known a girl I couldn't disillusion, so listen close to me now. You're wrong. You will not find adventure, nor romance. At best, you'll meet with unspeakable boredom. At worst, you'll meet with an early death."

Sophia blinked. His description of Tortola gave her some pause, but she dismissed any concern quickly. After all, it wasn't as though she meant to *stay* there.

The captain reached to retrieve his felt beaver from the bar.

"Please." Sophia clutched his arm. Heavens. It was like clutching a wool-sheathed cannon. Ignoring the warm tingle in her belly, she made her eyes wide and her voice beseeching. The role of innocent, helpless miss was one she'd been playing for years. "Please, you must take me. I've nowhere else to go."

"Oh, I'm certain you'd figure something out. Pretty thing like you? After all," he said, quirking an eyebrow, "you can look after yourself."

"Captain Grayson—"

"Miss. Jane. Turner." His voice grew thin with impatience. "You waste your breath, appealing to my sense of honor and decency. Any gentleman in my place would send you off at once."

"Yes, but you're no gentleman." She gripped his arm again and looked him square in the eye. "Are you?"

He froze. All that muscle rippling with energy, the rugged profile animated by insolence—for an instant, it all turned to stone. Sophia held her breath, knowing she'd just wagered her future on this, the last remaining card in her hand.

But this was so much more thrilling than whist.

"No," he said finally. "No, I'm not. I'm a tradesman, and I need to turn a profit. So long as you've silver to pay your passage, the brig *Aphrodite* has a waiting berth."

Relief sighed through her body. "Thank you."

"Have you trunks?"

"Two. Outside with a porter."

"Very well." His mouth curved in a slow, devilish smile. A conspiratorial smile. The sort of smile a young lady of fine breeding didn't acknowledge, let alone return.

So naturally, wicked thing that she was, Sophia smiled back.

“Well,” he murmured, “this is going to be a challenge.”

“What is?” she asked, feeling suddenly disinclined to put up much of a fight.

“Retrieving your trunks, with you clinging to my arm.”

“Oh.” Yes, she was still clinging to his arm, wasn’t she? Drat. And yet—she wasn’t quite ready to let it go.

Maybe it was the lingering desperation from her episode with Bains, or the flood of profound relief that accompanied her rescue. Perhaps it was a perverse fascination with this enigma of a man, who possessed the brute strength to toss grown men around, and just enough charm to be truly dangerous. Or maybe it was simply the feel of his rock-hard muscles beneath her hand, and the knowledge that she’d made them flex.

Sophia couldn’t say. But touching him made her feel exhilarated. Powerful and alive. Everything she’d been waiting her whole life to feel. Everything she’d been prepared to travel halfway across the globe to find.

In running away, she had made the decision to embrace infamy.

And lo, here he was.

# A LADY OF PERSUASION

BY TESSA DARE

ON SALE SEPTEMBER 29, 2009

Only one thing could convince Sir Tobias Aldridge, an incorrigible rake, to profess undying fidelity to a woman he's just met. Revenge. What better way to get back at his enemy, than by stealing the scoundrel's sister? Not that Toby finds it a chore, seducing a beguiling, sultry beauty freshly arrived from the West Indies. When the prize is Isabel Grayson, vengeance is doubly rewarding.

Isabel is determined to marry a wealthy, powerful lord and become a lady of influence, using her rank and fortune to fight social injustice. Sir Toby, with his paltry title and infamous reputation, is unsuitable husband material—but he makes her blood race, her heart pound, and her long-buried passions come to the surface. If she can reform the charming devil, she'll get exactly what she craves: society's respect. But it's a dangerous gamble. For if Toby wins this battle of persuasion, Isabel could lose her heart.

Visit <http://www.tessadare.com/> in September of 2009 to read an excerpt from *A Lady of Persuasion*.

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"Prepare  
to fall in love."  
—JULIA QUINN

# A LADY OF PERSUASION

~ Tessa Dare ~



A Novel

# ABOUT TESSA DARE

Tessa Dare is a part-time librarian, full-time mommy and swing-shift writer living in Southern California.

Tessa lived a rather nomadic childhood in the Midwest. As a girl, she discovered that no matter how many times she moved, two kinds of friends traveled with her: the friends in books, and the friends in her head. She still converses with both sets daily.

Tessa writes fresh and flirty historical romance, a blog, and the stray magazine article. To the chagrin of her family, Tessa does not write grocery lists, Christmas cards, or timely checks to utility companies. She shares a tiny bungalow with her husband, their two children, a dog, and many dust bunnies. Tessa's first three historical romances will be released back-to-back by Ballantine in July, August, and September of 2009.

Tessa would love to hear from you! You can reach her at [tessa@tessadare.com](mailto:tessa@tessadare.com), or visit her website at <http://www.tessadare.com>.



# PRAISE FOR TESSA DARE

“Dare seems to have fit all the best of romance into one novel, from sensuous interludes and crafty humor to endearing multidimensional characters.”

—*Publisher’s Weekly*, Starred Review

“An exceptional debut novel... Captivates with sassy wit, a lush, sweetly intense sensuality, and an abundance of beautifully articulated, appealing characters.”

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“It’s easy to get lost in the world of Tessa Dare’s writing.”

—Jane Litte, of [DearAuthor.com](http://DearAuthor.com)



COURTNEY MILAN

*<http://www.courtneymilan.com>*

Dear Reader,

I am not entirely sure I want to introduce you to Courtney Milan.

Please don't misunderstand me. Courtney Milan is not only one of the most intelligent and talented people I've ever been blessed to know, but also one of the kindest and most generous. The bravery with which she approaches life and writing is a constant inspiration. Whenever I run low on my own supply, she has surplus confidence to lend, and I love her for it. You will love her, too.

So allow me to rephrase.

I'm not entirely sure, dear reader, that *you* want to be introduced to Courtney Milan just yet. For you see, on the pages following this are excerpts—tantalizing tastes of brilliant books. Books that will transport you to early Victorian England and show you the humor and heartfelt emotion to be found in every inch of it—not just the ballrooms and grand estates, but the workaday shops and humble rented rooms, too. Books filled with dialogue so clever and compelling, you'll be continually guessing what the characters will say next, and then realizing with deep satisfaction they couldn't have possibly said anything else.

Books that will not be available for several months. After reading these excerpts, in all probability you will be stricken by a profound, gnawing, all-consuming need to read these books in their entirety, immediately. And yet, you will not be able to do so. Life may very well become unbearable.

So maybe it's best that you close this book and walk away. Phone a friend, go for a stroll...eat some chocolate, perhaps.

Under no circumstances should you turn the page.

Best Regards,

*Tessa Dare*

You turned the page!

Brava!

That was a test, and you have passed, proving yourself to be possessed of curiosity, courage, and a disinclination to following directions. You are therefore worthy of the brilliance that is Courtney Milan. When you enter her fictional world, be assured you will find yourself amongst friends.

*Tessa Dare*

# THIS WICKED GIFT

A NOVELLA IN *THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS*

BY COURTNEY MILAN

ON SALE OCTOBER 1, 2009

**W**illiam White has wanted Lavinia Spencer ever since she first looked up at him and smiled, while she was working in her father's lending library. When her father becomes ill and the family finances take a turn for the worse, he realizes she might have to make choices that mean he would never have her. He wants her forever, but that's outside the realm of possibility. Instead, he's willing to settle for a bare—in fact, one might say a *naked*—minimum.

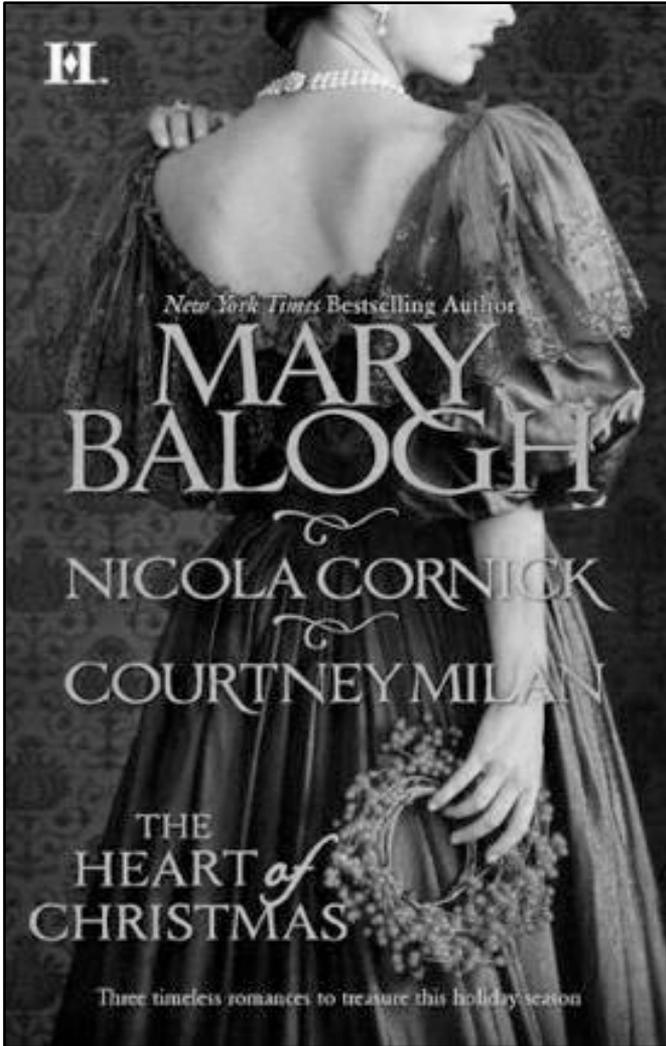
But when he sets his plan in action, he discovers that finances or no finances, there are some things money just can't buy.

That's not going to stop him from trying to purchase them.

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“This Wicked Gift” appears in *The Heart of Christmas*, an anthology. Appearing alongside Courtney Milan’s novella are two Christmas favorites from historical romance stars:

- “A Handful of Gold” by Mary Balogh, a reissue of a 1998 classic Christmas tale
- “A Season for Suitors,” by Nicola Cornick, a reissue of a 2005 story

## CHAPTER ONE



LONDON, 1822

**I**t was four days until Christmas and four minutes until the family lending library closed for the evening. Lavinia Spencer sat, the daily ledger opened on the desk in front of her, and waited for the moment when the day would end and she could officially remove her five pennies from the take. Every day since summer, she'd set aside a coin or five from her family's earnings. She'd saved the largesse in a cloth bag in the desk drawer, where nobody would find it and be tempted to spend it. Over the weeks, her bag had begun to burgeon. Now, she had almost two pounds.

Two pounds in small, cold coins to the rest of the world. For Lavinia, the money meant pies. Spices, sugar, and wine to mull them with. And, once she scoured the

markets, perhaps a goose—a small goose—roasted alongside their usual turnips. Her two pounds meant a Christmas celebration that would make Papa sit up and smile. Six months of planning—but the effort had been worth it, because Lavinia was going to deliver a holiday meal just like the ones her mother had prepared.

The business they'd conducted today had been frenetic. Lavinia finished adding columns in the daybook and nodded to herself. Today's take—according to her records—had been very fine indeed. If she hadn't miscalculated, today she'd let herself take *six* pennies from the till—half a shilling that made her that much more certain of goose, as opposed to mere stewing fowl. Lavinia took a deep breath. Layered atop the musk of leather-bound volumes and India ink, she could almost detect the scent of roast poultry. She imagined the red of mulled wine swirling in mugs. And in her mind's eye, she saw her father sitting taller in his chair, color finally touching his cheeks.

She reached for the cash box and started counting.

The bell above the door rang—at a minute to closing. A gust of winter wind poured in. Lavinia looked up, prepared to be annoyed. But when she saw who had entered, she caught her breath.

It was *him*. Mr. William Q. White—and what the “Q” stood for, she'd not had the foresight to demand on the day when he'd purchased his subscription. But the name rolled off the tongue. *William Q. White*. She could never think of him as simply a monosyllabic last name.

He took off his hat and gloves at the threshold and shook droplets of water from the sodden gray of his coat. Mr. William Q. White was tall, and his dark hair was cropped close to his skull. He did not dawdle in the doorway, letting the rain into the shop as so many other customers did. Instead, he moved quickly, purposefully, without ever appearing to rush. It was not even a second before he closed the door on the frigid winter and entered the room. Despite his alacrity, he did not track in mud.

His eyes, a rich mahogany, met hers. She bit her lip and twisted her feet around the legs of her stool. He spoke little, but what he said—

“Miss Spencer.” He gestured with his hat in acknowledgment.

Unremarkable words, but her toes curled in their slippers nonetheless. He spoke in a deep baritone, his voice as rich as the finest drinking chocolate. But what really made her palms tingle was a wild, indefinable *something* about his accent. It wasn't the grating Cockney the delivery boys employed, nor the flat, pompous perfection of the London aristocracy. He had a pure, cultured voice—but one that was nonetheless from somewhere many miles distant. His r's had just a hint of a roll to them; his vowels stretched and elongated into elegant diphthongs. Every time he said “Miss Spencer,” the exotic cadence of his speech seemed to whisper, “I have been places.”

She imagined him adding, “Would you like to come with me?”

Yes. Yes, she would. Lavinia rather fancied a man with long . . . vowels.

And oh, she knew she was being foolish and giddy about Mr. William Q. White, but if a girl couldn't be foolish and giddy about a man when she was nineteen, when *could* she be foolish? It was hard to be serious all the time, especially when there was so much to be serious about.

And so she took a risk. “Merry Christmas, Mr. White.”

He was examining the shelves. At her words, he turned towards her. His eyes slid from her waist up to her face, and Lavinia ducked her head and stared at the stack of pennies in front of her to hide her blush.

He didn't need to speak to make her giddy, not when he looked at her with that breathtaking intensity. For one scalding moment, she thought he was going to address her. Perhaps he would even step towards her. Her hands curled around the edge of the desk in anticipation. But instead, he shook his head and turned back to the shelves.

A pity. Not today, then. Maybe not any day. And with Mr. William Q. White ignoring her again, it was time for Lavinia to set her fancies to one side and give herself over to seriousness. She counted the coins from the cash box and piled them into stacks of twelve, making sure to exactly align the pennies atop each other before starting a new pile.

Lavinia prided herself on her ability to get the take exactly right. Her longest stretch of perfection was thirty-seven days in a row, spanning the entirety of October. That run had been ruined by a penny's difference on November fourth. She had no intention of letting October's record stand, however. It had been twenty-two days since her last error. Today would be number twenty-three.

She'd counted and double-counted every transaction. If she was so much as a ha'penny short, she'd eat Mr. William Q. White's extremely wet hat. Her hands flew as she placed dirty coins into careful piles. Four, six, eight, and with the loose coins, that made seven shillings, and four and one-half pence. Less than she'd imagined. She bit her lip in suspicion and glanced at the tally in the ledger.

Trepidation settled in an indigestible mass in Lavinia's belly. There, written in black and white in the daily ledger, was the final sum. Ten shillings, four and one-half pence.

She wasn't half a penny short. She was missing three full shillings.

Lavinia recounted the coins, but there was no error. Of course not; Lavinia did not make errors in accounting. Nobody would take her to task for the missing coins. Her father was too ill to examine the books, and her brother would never question Lavinia's jurisdiction over the shop.

Still, she did not like to question herself. How had she made such a stupendous error? She felt a touch of vertigo, as if the room were spinning in circles around the ledger.

She knew what she had to do. It hurt—oh, how it stung. Those three shillings could be the difference between a small goose and no goose at all. But with her father's

creditors clamoring, and the cost of his medicines growing almost monthly, the family could not spare more than a handful of pennies loss each day. Lavinia slid open the drawer to make up the difference from her precious Christmas hoard.

She always placed the bag in the same spot—precisely halfway back and flush against the left side. But her fingers met no velvet mass lumpy with coin. She groped wildly and found nothing but the smooth wood of the drawer from corner to corner. Lavinia held her breath and peered inside. There was nothing in the drawer but a cracked inkwell, and that—she checked—contained nothing but bluish smears.

“Hell.” It was the worst curse word she could imagine. She whispered it; it was either that, or shriek.

She wasn’t missing a few shillings. She was missing the full two pounds. All of Christmas had just disappeared—everything from the decorative holly down through her carefully-planned menu.

“Vinny?” The words were a tremulous query behind her.

With those words, the rising tide of Lavinia’s panic broke against an absolute certainty. She knew where her precious two pounds had gone.

Lavinia placed her hands on her hips. She forced herself to turn around slowly, rather than whirling as she wished. Her brother, still wrapped for the blustery weather outside, smiled weakly, holding out his hands in supplication. Water dripped from his coat and puddled on the floor.

James was four years younger than she, but Mama had always said to subtract ten years from a man’s age when calculating his sense. James had never seen fit to prove Mama’s formula wrong.

“Oh.” He peered beyond her to the coins, stacked in grim military ranks along the edge of the counter and the ransacked drawer. His lip quirked. “I see you’ve, um, already tallied the cash.”

“James Allen Spencer.” Lavinia reached out and grabbed his ear.

He winced, but didn’t dodge or protest—a sure sign of guilt.

“What,” she demanded, “have you done with my two pounds?”

# PROOF BY SEDUCTION

BY COURTNEY MILAN

ON SALE JANUARY 1, 2010

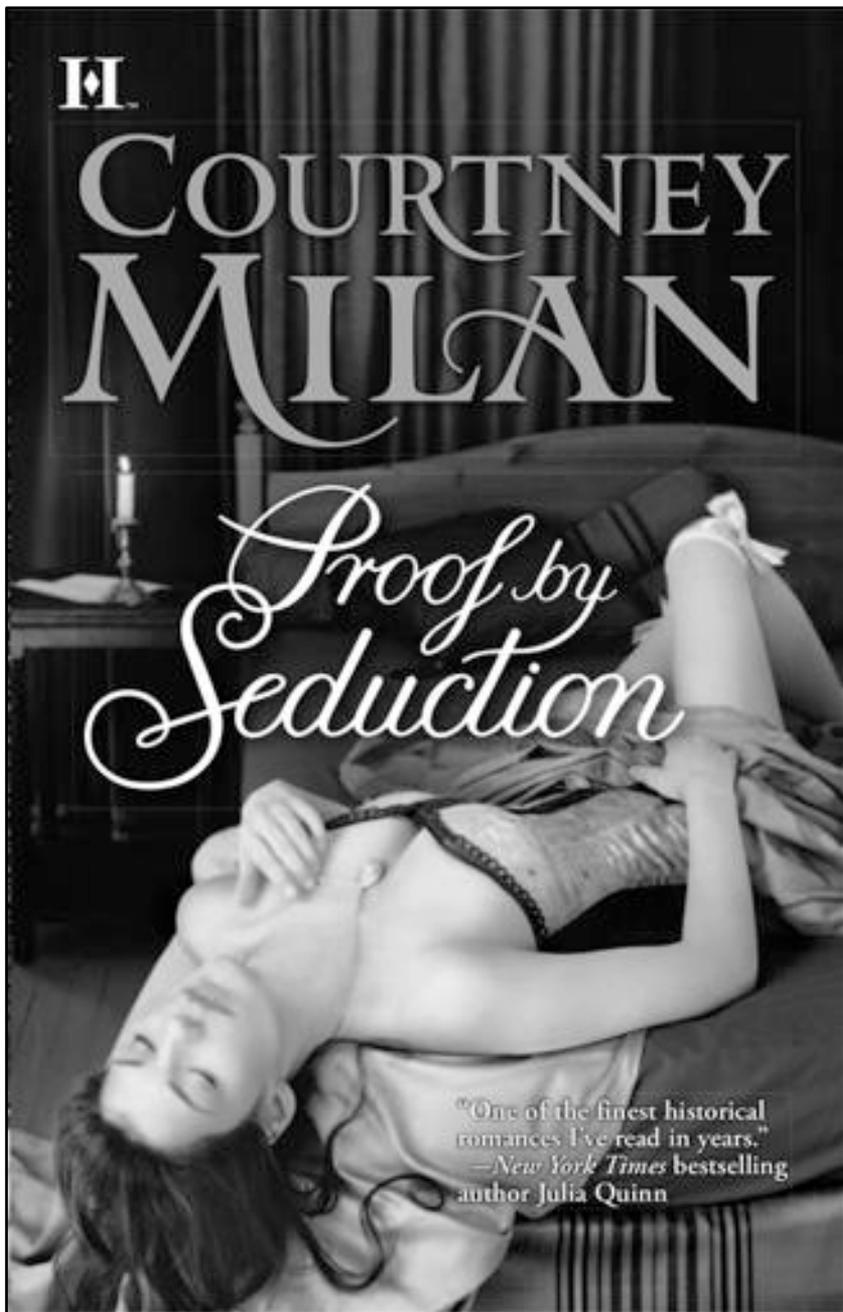
**J**enny Keeble never let her humble upbringing stop her from having the life she wanted. She's made her way in the world as a fortune teller, and she has a gift for making her clients believe the words she says. Business is good . . . until she meets her match in the form of Gareth Carhart, the Marquess of Blakely, a scientist and sworn bachelor.

Broodingly handsome, Gareth is appalled to discover his cousin has fallen under the spell of "Madame Esmerelda," and he vows to prove her a fraud. But his unexpected attraction to the fiery enchantress defies logic. Jenny disrupts every facet of Gareth's calculated plan—until he can't decide whether to ruin her or claim her for his own. Now, as they engage in a passionate battle of wills, two lonely souls must choose between everything they know . . . and the boundless possibilities of love.

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II

COURTNEY  
MILAN

*Proof by  
Seduction*

"One of the finest historical  
romances I've read in years."  
—*New York Times* bestselling  
author Julia Quinn

## CHAPTER ONE



LONDON, 1836

**T**welve years spent plying her trade had taught Jenny Keeble to leave no part of her carefully manufactured atmosphere to chance. The sandalwood smoke wafting from the brazier added a touch of the occult: not too cloying, yet unquestionably exotic. But it was by rote that she checked the cheap black cotton draped over her rickety table; routine alone compelled her to straighten her garishly colored wall hangings, purchased from gypsies.

Every detail—the cobwebs she left undisturbed in the corner of the room, the gauze that draped her basement windows and filtered the sunlight into indirect haze—

whispered that here magic worked and spirits conveyed sage advice.

It was precisely the effect Jenny should have desired.

So why did she wish she could abandon this costume? True, the virulently red-and-blue striped skirt, paired with a green blouse, did nothing to flatter her looks. Layer upon heavy layer obscured her waist and puffed her out until she resembled nothing so much as a round, multi-hued melon. Her skin suffocated under a heavy covering of paint and kohl. But her disquiet ran deeper than the thick lacquers of cream and powder.

A sharp rat-tat-tat sounded at the door.

She'd worked twelve years for this. Twelve years of careful lies and half-truths, spent cultivating clients. But there was no room for uncertainty in Jenny's profession. She took a deep breath and pushed Jenny Keeble's doubts aside. In her place, she constructed the imperturbable edifice of Madame Esmerelda. A woman who could see anything. Who predicted everything. And who stopped at nothing.

With her lies firmly in place, Jenny opened the door.

Two men stood on her stoop. Ned, her favorite client, she'd expected. He was awkward and lanky, as only a youth just out of adolescence could be. A shock of light brown hair topped his young features. His lips curled in an open, welcoming smile. She would have greeted him easily, but today, another fellow stood several feet behind Ned. The stranger was extraordinarily tall, even taller than Ned. He stood several feet back, his arms folded in stern disapproval.

"Madame Esmerelda," Ned said. "I'm sorry I didn't inform you I was bringing along a guest."

Jenny peered at the man behind Ned. The man's coat was carelessly unbuttoned. Some tailor had poured hours into the exquisite fit of that garment. It was cut close enough to the body to show off the form, but loose enough to allow movement. His sandy-brown hair was tousled, his cravat tied in the simplest of knots. The details of his wardrobe bespoke an impatient arrogance, as if his

appearance was little more than a bother, his attention reserved for weightier matters.

That attention shifted to Jenny now, and a shiver raced down her spine. With one predatorial sweep of his eyes, he took in Jenny's costume from head to toe. She swallowed.

"Madame Esmerelda," Ned said, "this is my cousin."

A cold glimmer of irritation escaped the other man, and Ned expelled a feeble sigh.

"Yes, Blakely. May I present to you Madame Esmerelda." The monotone introduction wasn't even a question. "Madame, this is Blakely. That would be Gareth Carhart, Marquess of Blakely. Et cetera."

A beat of apprehension pulsed through Jenny as she curtsied. Ned had spoken of his cousin before. Based on Ned's descriptions, she'd imagined the marquess to be old and perhaps a little decrepit, obsessed with facts and figures. Ned's cousin was supposed to be coldly distant, frighteningly uncivil, and so focused on his own scientific interests that he was unaware of the people around him.

But this man wasn't distant; even standing a full yard away, her skin prickled in response to his presence. He wasn't old; he was lean without being skinny, and his cheeks were shadowed by the stubble of a man in his prime. Most of all, there was nothing unfocused about him. She'd often thought Ned had the eyes of a terrier: warm, liquid, and trusting. His cousin had those of a lion: tawny, ferocious, and more than a little feral.

Jenny gave silent thanks she wasn't a gazelle.

She turned and swept her arm in regal welcome. "Come in. Be seated." The men trooped in, settling on chairs that creaked under their weight. Jenny remained standing.

"Ned, how can I assist you today?"

Ned beamed at her. "Well. Blakely and I have been arguing. He doesn't think you can predict the future."

Neither did Jenny. She resented sharing that belief.

"We've agreed—he's going to use science to demonstrate the accuracy of your predictions."

“Demonstrate? Scientifically?” The words whooshed out of her, as if she’d been prodded in the stomach. Jenny grasped the table in front of her for support. “Well. That would be. . .” *Unlikely? Unfortunate?* “That would be unobjectionable. How shall he proceed?”

Ned waved his hand at his cousin. “Well, go ahead, Blakely. Ask her something.”

Lord Blakely leaned back in his chair. Up until this moment, he had not spoken a single word; his eyes had traveled about the room, though. “You want *me* to ask her something?” He spoke slowly, drawing out each syllable with precision. “*I* consult logic, not old charlatans.”

Ned and Jenny spoke atop each other. “She’s no charlatan!” protested Ned.

But Jenny’s hands had flown to her hips for another reason entirely. “Thirty,” she protested, “is not old!”

Ned turned to her, his brow lifting. A devastating silence cloaked the room. It was a measure of her own agitation that she’d forsaken Madame Esmerelda’s character already. Instead, she’d spoken as a woman.

And the marquess noticed. That tawny gaze flicked from her kerchiefed head down to the garish skirts obscuring her waist. His vision bored through every one of her layers. The appraisal was thoroughly masculine. A sudden tremulous awareness tickled Jenny’s palms.

And then he looked away. A queer quirk of his lips; the smallest exhalation, and like that, he dismissed her.

Jenny was no lady, no social match for Lord Blakely. She was not the sort who would inspire him to tip his hat if he passed her on the street. She should have been accustomed to such cursory dismissals. But beneath her skirts, she felt suddenly brittle, like a pile of dried-up potato parings, ready to blow away with one strong gust of wind. Her fingernails bit crescent moons into her hands.

Madame Esmerelda wouldn’t care about this man’s interest. Madame Esmerelda never let herself get angry. And so Jenny swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled mysteriously. “I am also not a charlatan.”

Lord Blakely raised an eyebrow. "That remains to be proven. As I have no desire to seek answers for myself, I believe Ned will question you."

"I already have!" Ned gestured widely. "About *everything*. About *life* and *death*."

Lord Blakely rolled his eyes. No doubt he'd taken Ned's dramatic protest as youthful exaggeration. But Jenny knew it for the simple truth it was. Two years earlier, Ned had wandered into this room and asked the question that had changed both their lives: "Is there any reason I shouldn't kill myself?"

At the time, Jenny had wanted to disclaim all responsibility. Her first impulse had been to distance herself from the boy, to say she wasn't really able to see the future. But the question was not one a nineteen-year-old posed to a stranger because he was considering his options rationally. She'd known, even then, that the young man had asked because he was at his wits' end.

So she'd lied. She told him she saw happiness in his future, that he had every reason to live. He'd believed her. And as time passed, he'd gradually moved past despair. Today, he stood in front of her, almost confident.

It should have counted as a triumph of some kind, a good deed chalked up to Jenny's account. But on that first day, she hadn't just taken his despair. She'd taken his money, too. And since then, she and Ned had been bound together in this tangle of coin and deceit.

"Life and death?" Lord Blakely fingered the cheap fabric that loosely draped her chairs. "Then there should be no problem with my more prosaic proposal. I'm sure you are aware Ned must marry. Madame—Esmerelda, is it?—why don't you tell me the name of the woman he should choose."

Ned stiffened, and a chill went down Jenny's spine. Advice hidden behind spiritual maundering was one thing. But she knew that Ned had resisted wedlock, and for good reasons. She had no intention of trapping him.

"The spirits have not chosen to reveal such details," she responded smoothly.

The marquess pulled an end of lead pencil from his pocket and licked it. He bent over a notebook and scribbled a notation. "Can't predict future with particularity." He squinted at her. "This will be a damned short test of your abilities if you can do no better."

Jenny's fingers twitched in irritation. "I can say," she said slowly, "in the cosmic sense of things, he will meet her soon."

"There!" crowed Ned in triumph. "There's your specifics."

"Hm." Lord Blakely frowned over the words he'd transcribed. "The 'cosmic sense' being something along the lines of, the cosmos is ageless? No matter which girl Ned meets, I suppose you would say he met her 'soon.' Come, Ned. Isn't she supposed to have arcane knowledge?"

Jenny's pinched her lips together and she turned away, her skirts swishing about her ankles. Blakely's eyes followed her; but when she cast a glance at him over her shoulder, he looked away. "Of course, it is possible to give more specifics. In ancient days, soothsayers predicted the future by studying the entrails of small animals, such as pigeons or squirrels. I have been trained in those methods."

A look of doubt crossed Lord Blakely's face. "You're going to slash open a bird?"

Jenny's heart flopped at the prospect. She could no more disembowel a dove than she could earn an honest living. But what she needed now was a good show to distract the marquess.

"I'll need to fetch the proper tools," she said.

Jenny turned and ducked through the gauzy black curtains that shielded the details of her mundane living quarters from her clients. A sack, fresh from this morning's shopping trip, sat on the tiny table in the back room. She picked it up and returned.

The two men watched her as she stepped back through a cloud of black cloth, her hands filled with burlap. She set the bag on the table before Ned.

“Ned,” she said, “it is your future which is at stake. That means your hand must be the instrument of doom. The contents of that bag? You will eviscerate it.”

Ned tilted his head and looked up. His liquid brown eyes pleaded with her.

Lord Blakely gaped. “You kept a small animal in a sack, just sitting about in the event it was needed? What kind of creature are you?”

Jenny raised one merciless eyebrow. “I *was* expecting the two of you.” And when Ned still hesitated, she sighed. “Ned, have I ever led you astray?”

Jenny’s admonition had the desired effect. Ned drew a deep breath and thrust his arm gingerly into the bag, his mouth puckered in distaste. The expression on his face flickered from queasy horror to confusion. From there, it flew headlong into outright bafflement. Shaking his head, he pulled his fist from the bag and turned his hand palm up.

For a long moment, the two men stared at the offending lump. It was brightly colored. It was round. It was—

“An orange?” Lord Blakely rubbed his forehead. “Not quite what I expected.” He scribbled another notation.

“We live in enlightened times,” Jenny murmured. “Now, you know what to do. Go ahead. Disembowel it.”

Ned turned the fruit in his hand. “I didn’t think oranges had bowels.”

Jenny let that one pass without comment.

Lord Blakely fished in his coat pockets and came up with a polished silver penknife. It was embossed with laurel leaves. Naturally; even his pens were bedecked with proof of his nobility. His lordship had no doubt chosen the design to emphasize how far above mere commoners he stood. The marquess held the weapon out, as formally as if he were passing a sword.

Soberly, Ned accepted it. He placed the sacrificial citrus on the table in front of him, and then with one careful incision, eviscerated it. He speared deep into its heart, his hands steady, and then cut it to pieces. Jenny allotted

herself one short moment of wistful sorrow for her after-dinner treat gone awry as the juice ran everywhere.

"Enough." She reached out and covered his hand mid-stab. "It's dead now," she explained gravely.

He pulled his hand away and nodded. Lord Blakely took back his knife and cleaned it with a handkerchief.

Jenny studied the corpse. It was orange. It was pulpy. It was going to be a mess to clean up. Most importantly, it gave her an excuse to sit and think of something mystical to say—the only reason for this exercise, really. Lord Blakely demanded particulars. But in Jenny's profession, specifics were the enemy.

"What do you see?" asked Ned, his voice hushed.

"I see . . . I see . . . an elephant."

"Elephant," Lord Blakely repeated, as he transcribed her words. "I hope that isn't the extent of your prediction. Unless, Ned, you plan to marry into the genus *Loxodonta*."

Ned blinked. "Loxo-wha?"

"Comprised, among others, of pachyderms."

Jenny ignored the byplay. "Ned, I am having difficulties forming the image of the woman you should marry in my mind. Tell me, how do you imagine your ideal woman?"

"Oh," Ned said without the least hesitation, "she's exactly like you. Except younger."

Jenny swallowed uncomfortably. "Whatever do you mean? She's clever? Witty?"

Ned scratched his chin in puzzlement. "No. I mean she's dependable and honest."

The mysterious smile slipped from Jenny's lips for the barest instant, and she looked at him in appalled and flattered horror. If this was how Ned assessed character, he would end up married to a street thief in no time at all.

Lord Blakely's hand froze above his paper. No doubt his thoughts mirrored hers.

"What?" Ned demanded. "What are you two staring at?"

"I," said Lord Blakely, "am dependable. *She* is—"

“You,” retorted Ned, “are cold and calculating. I’ve known Madame Esmerelda for two full years. And in that time, she’s become more like family than anyone else. So don’t you dare talk about her in that tone of voice.”

Jenny’s vision blurred and her head swam. She had no experience with family; all she remembered was the unforgiving school where an unknown benefactor had paid her tuition. She’d known since she was a very small child that she stood alone against the world. That had brought her to this career—the sure knowledge that nobody would help her, and everyone would lie to her. Lying to them instead had only seemed fair play.

But with Ned’s words, a quiet wistfulness filled her. Family seemed the opposite of this lonely life, where even her friends had been won by falsehoods.

Ned wasn’t finished with his cousin. “You see me as some kind of tool, to be used when convenient. Well, I’m tired of it. Find your own wife. Get your own heirs. I’m not doing anything for you any longer.”

Jenny blinked back tears and looked at Ned again. His familiar, youthful features were granite. Beneath his bravado, she knew he feared his elder cousin. And yet he’d stood up to the man just now. For her.

She wasn’t Ned’s family. She wasn’t really his friend. And no matter what had transpired between them, she was still the fraud who bilked him of a few pounds in exchange for false platitudes. Now he was asking her to repay him with more lies.

Well. Jenny swallowed the lump of regret in her throat. If deceit was all she had, she would use it. But she hadn’t saved Ned’s life for his cousin’s convenience.

Lord Blakely straightened. His outraged glower—that cold and stubborn set of his lip—indicated he thought Ned *was* a mere utensil. That Lord Blakely was superior in intelligence and birth to everyone else in the room, and he would force their dim intellects to comprehend the fact.

He thought he was superior to his cousin? Well. She was going to make the marquess regret he'd ever asked for specifics.

"Ned, you recently received an invitation to a ball, did you not?"

He puckered his brow. "I did."

"What sort of a ball?"

"Some damned fool crush of a coming-out, I think. No intention of going."

The event sounded promising. There were sure to be many young women in attendance. Jenny could already taste her revenge on the tip of her tongue.

"You will go to this ball," she pronounced. And then she swept her arms wide, encompassing the two men. "You will both go to this ball."

Lord Blakely looked taken aback.

"I can see nothing of Ned's wife in the orange. But at precisely ten o'clock and thirty-nine minutes, Lord Blakely, *you* will see the woman you will marry. And you *will* marry her, if you approach her in the manner I prescribe."

The scrape of Lord Blakely's pencil echoed loudly in the reigning silence. When he finished, he set the utensil down carefully.

"You wanted a scientific test, my lord." Jenny placed her hands flat on the table in satisfaction. "You have one."

# COURTNEY MILAN

Courtney Milan lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, a marginally-trained dog,<sup>1</sup> and an attack cat. Courtney is happy when standards in the Milan household hover above mediocrity. Her husband



attempts not to kill people for a living.<sup>2</sup> In exchange, Courtney attempts not to do the dishes.

Before writing historical romance, Courtney experimented with various occupations: computer programming, dog-training, scientificating. . . . Having given up on being able to do any of those things, she's taken to heart the axiom that those who can't do, teach. When she's not reading (lots), writing (lots), or sleeping (not enough), she can be found in the vicinity of a classroom.

Courtney's publishing debut is a novella in the anthology *The Heart of Christmas*. "This Wicked Gift" will appear alongside stories from Mary Balogh and Nicola Cornick. It will be followed in January of 2010 by her debut novel, *Proof by Seduction*.

Find Courtney online at

<http://www.courtneymilan.com>.

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<sup>1</sup> The astute reader will notice this sentence could imply that Mr. Milan is a marginally-trained dog. Never fear; Mr. Milan is not trained. (He's not a dog, either.)

<sup>2</sup> The astute reader will notice that this sentence can be read either as "Courtney's husband attempts to make his living by means other than offing unsuspecting passersby," or as "Courtney's husband, while making a living, tries not to leave dead bodies in his wake." Luckily, both are true. It must be admitted that Mr. Milan has had greater success with the former.

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Tessa Dare is a part time librarian, full-time mommy, and swing-shift writer. She makes her home in Southern California, where she shares a cozy, cluttered bungalow with her husband, their two children, and a dog. You can learn more about

Tessa by visiting her on the web at:  
<http://www.tessadare.com>.

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Courtney Milan lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, a marginally-trained dog, and an attack cat. Her excerpts may be dangerous, but she's mostly harmless. Visit her on the web at:

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**October 1, 2009**

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