

A ROMANCE SAMPLER

Decadent Treats



ZOE ARCHER ~ KATHARINE ASHE ~ MONICA BURNS ~ ROBYN DEHART
LILA DIPASQUA ~ ELIZABETH ESSEX ~ SHANA GALEN ~ ALEXANDRA HAWKINS
SOPHIE JORDAN ~ VANESSA KELLY ~ KRIS KENNEDY ~ MIA MARLOWE
ASHLEY MARCH ~ ELISABETH NAUGHTON ~ MIRANDA NEVILLE
HEATHER SNOW ~ EMMA WILDES

A ROMANCE SAMPLER

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(our heroes, of course)

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Katharine Ashe In the Arms of a Marquess
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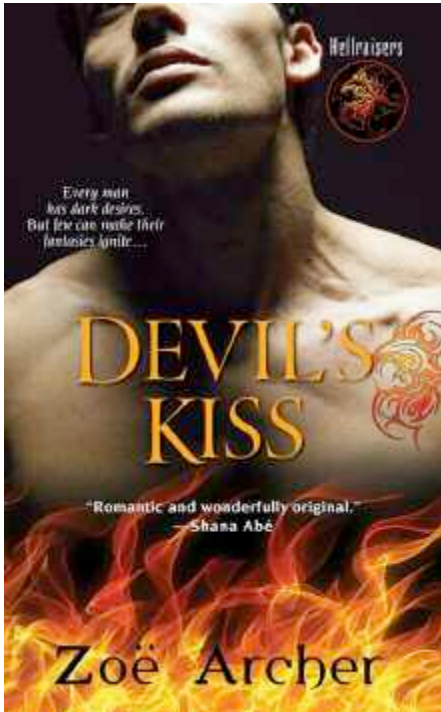
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~SINFULLY DELICIOUS TRUFFLES~

DEVIL'S KISS ~ ZOË ARCHER



James Sherbourne, Earl of Whitney, is one of the infamous Hellraisers, losing himself in the chase for adventure and pleasure with his four closest friends. Yet these pursuits pale when he becomes enchanted by a beautiful Romani girl, Zora Grey. Despite her own attraction to Whit, Zora can't

stop him and his Hellraisers from a fiendish curse: the power to grant their own hearts' desires, to chase their pleasures from the merely debauched to the truly diabolical.

England, 1762. Through the Devil's magic, the Gypsy Zora is now trapped within James Sherbourne, Earl of Whitney's London home. This same magic compels Zora to answer all of Whit's questions truthfully. An inveterate gambler, Whit has demanded that Zora show him her card secrets. But the stakes are far higher than a simple game of cards...

Maybe Zora could still reach Whit, beneath the guise of revealing her card secrets. "You can either deal the second card or deal from the bottom of the deck."

"I know about those techniques—and when we played I

watched your hands." These last words were a silken murmur. "I never saw you do either."

She flushed to think of him looking at her hands, curiously intimate. "Simply because you could not see it does not mean it didn't happen. Watch." She immersed herself in the deal, her fingers barely whispering over the cards as she worked.

His hands, large and warm, covered hers. Stilling her. Yet she was far from still. His touch ignited cascades of awareness through her, darkly brilliant. The falsely-named Mr. Holliday must have gifted Whit with some other enchantment, some power of seduction, for how else might she explain the hot need flooding her at Whit's touch, the rough desire that spared no thought for her heart or her mind? *He is your captor. Yet there's another man within him, an imperfect, searching man who longs for meaning.*

"Slower." His voice was deep, a shadowed rumble.

She pulled her hands out from beneath his, feeling the drag of his hot skin against hers. Air became scarce, thick.

"Like this." She demonstrated again her dealing technique, slowing down her movements so he might see them. It felt awkward and graceless to slow her actions. Yet she must. She might not reach Whit, free him from the Devil's influence. If so, if he was lost, and the sooner he learned her skills, the sooner she could leave and return to her family, her people.

She went through the process one more time before Whit's hand came to rest atop hers again. And again she felt the heat of his touch travel in incendiary waves through her body.

"Now me," he said.

She pushed the deck of cards into his hand, wanting distance. He gave her none. His tall, masculine presence kept too close as he stood beside her. Now it was her turn to watch *his* hands, large yet dexterous, the tendons of his wrists whilst he shuffled the cards.

Her life was spent studying hands and the lines upon them. They revealed much—not the future, not what was to be, but the person who possessed them, the paths the person had taken and the truths of that individual's life. Grime beneath fingernails, calluses, knuckles swollen from overuse, strength. Soft hands, barely lined, fresh and lavender-scented, adorned with rings or very lightly stained at the tips from pinches of snuff. Professional habit had her observing a person's hands within moments of meeting that person.

Hands were not sensual, not alive with sexual promise. They were business to Zora. Nothing more.

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Watching Whit work the cards changed her mind. She saw his fingers glide lightly over their printed surfaces and could not stop vivid images blazing through her thoughts. Those long fingers toying with her body, cleverly stroking and touching her to fevered arousal. The breadth of his palm, cradling her head as he kissed her deeply.

She ruthlessly shoved those thoughts aside. Desire was a drug trying to lull her into compliance. He was no longer the man he'd been. Difficult to remember that, when they shared these moments together not as captor and captive, but man and woman, as they had been before.

The erotic potential of Whit's hands captivated her. More than that. In their quick movements and the speed at which he learned this new art, she saw further evidence that his mind was incisive, adept. He might be born into privilege, but he was no thoughtless *gorgio* blue blood, whose brains had been systematically bred out of him. She furtively glanced up at his face. His brows were drawn down, the line of his mouth firm, and his blue eyes clear and sharp. He concentrated, giving his full attention to the task of mastering the cards. Nothing so arousing as a handsome man immersed in complex thought.

Within a few minutes, Whit shuffled and dealt with an expert's touch. His movements were as swift as her own. Had she not known what trick he used with the cards, she would never have realized he cheated.

"An adept student," she said.

She did not realize she had spoken aloud until his eyes gleamed with pleasure at her compliment.

"A skillful teacher," he murmured.

Their gazes connected, held. She felt herself drawn closer, pulled toward him by a force greater than her sizeable will.

She almost forgot. Forgot that she was here *against* her will. She could not rely on him.

Zora glanced away, breaking the connection.

"You have what you wanted," she said.

"Do I?" His question was casual, yet want pulsed beneath. Her jaw tightened. "My secrets at cards. I've given them to you."

"Is that all of them?"

"Yes. And I can't lie to you, so you know I speak the truth." She tipped her chin up. "When it comes to card games, I have shown you everything I know."

~ DEVIL'S KISS ~ ZOË ARCHER ~

"Not everything." He was an unyielding presence without even touching her. "There are still your secrets to telling fortunes with cards."

She turned back to him. "A nobleman and gambler hasn't a need to *dukker*. You didn't even want your fortune told at the camp."

He gave a shrug that only seemed indolent. Strength and potential simmered beneath the careless movement. "Now I want to know how."

"Let me go," she whispered. "Back to my people. Back to my life." Her eyes grew hot and damp as she stared up at him. To keep herself from placing a pleading hand upon his arm, she twisted her fingers in her skirts. "My family will be worried about me."

Another flare of shadowed regret in his gaze. He looked at her then, *truly* looked at her, and she willed herself still to return his look. Lifetimes passed, or mere seconds. A war was being fought behind the crystal blue of his eyes, where his desires and his principles battled against one another. She prayed that he was not so far gone, that the muscles of his conscience had not withered after probable years of disuse, that he had the strength to fight the Devil within.

His hand drifted up to his coat, finding the spot where a button had once been. The coat was fine, well-maintained. It seemed strange that a button would come loose and fall from it. But its absence seemed to strike a note in him, reminding him of something.

"No." It was he, this time, who turned away. "There are secrets you possess I still want."

Zora shivered, cold. Daylight had nearly broken, and violet shapes emerged outside, revealing themselves to be trimmed hedges of a walled garden, and beyond the wall, the forms of other imposing, heavy *gorgio* homes. The quiet of night slowly retreated.

"I want to leave," she pressed.

"Perhaps tomorrow. Or the day after that. I have yet to decide." His expression shifted, darkened. A mask sliding into place, obscuring who he once had been. He took her measure again, slowly and thoroughly. A boldly sexual look. As if he imagined the shapes their bodies would make when intertwined. "You intrigue me so."

"God," she said bitterly, "how I wish I didn't."

He took a step toward her. "Come, Zora. It need not be this way between us. We might enjoy one another. I promise you, I can give you quite a lot of pleasure." His confidence was indisputable, and she did not doubt him. He murmured, smiling, his lids lowered,

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"Let's to bed together."

"Will you force me," she asked, then added, acidly, "*my lord?*"

He looked startled. The mask slipped. "Never," he said at once. The notion seemed to appall him.

Good. Maybe there was yet hope for him, and for her. "That is what it will take to get me into your bed." Her voice was cutting. "Force. I won't go otherwise."

His eyes narrowed. "Do you hate me?"

"Yes," she said immediately.

Again, his surprise. As if he found himself suddenly on stage in the middle of a play and discovered he was performing not the role of the hero but the villain. "Do you desire me?"

The magic that controlled her would not allow her to lie. "Yes."

A quick blaze of triumph in his face. "Let me show you how I desire you." He stepped nearer. His head lowered, bringing his mouth close to hers. She felt the warmth of his breath as his lips hovered a scant inch from hers, the heat of his body as strong as a fever. This close, she saw stubble along his jaw, intoxicatingly male, the short dark fringe of his eyelashes, a multitude of tiny details imprinting themselves on her mind and her deepest self.

His kiss would devastate her. She knew that if his lips met hers, she would mistake him for who he had been, not who he was now, and the resistance she needed would burn to ash.

She turned her head to the side. His breath fanned her cheek. "By force alone. That is the only way you'll ever have me."

For a moment, she thought she had pushed him too far. His expression grew shadowed. Animal need gleamed through him, tightening him. He reached for her and she stiffened, readying herself. She would fight him, if she had to.

He did not grab her. Did not haul her to him, or use bruising, punishing hands.

Instead, he ran a fingertip lightly down her neck. She shivered.

"Care to bet on that?" he asked.

She had to answer, yet before she spoke, he turned away.

As if speaking to any guest, he said, "A bedchamber will be readied for you."

The thought of sleeping in a *gorgio* bed, in a *gorgio* house, felt like entombment. She had seen their cumbersome beds and thought them massive and terrifying, especially the ones with hanging draperies like shrouds.

"If I'm held prisoner in this place," she said, "then I will stay in this room."

~ DEVIL'S KISS ~ ZOË ARCHER ~

Of her many responses, this was one he hadn't anticipated. He looked around at the room, frowning. "You can't stay in the gaming room." This was a clear fact to him. Nobody slept in a room not designed for sleeping. Typical *gorgio*.

"Until you let me go, this is where I'll stay." She folded her arms across her chest.

"The other chambers are much more comfortable."

"Not to me."

Whit studied her for half a moment, as though she truly were a fox that had somehow been trapped within his home. A strange, wild creature in a place where it didn't belong.

He bowed, smiling. A gentleman's bow, elegant and effortless, highlighting the sleek muscularity of his body. "As my lady wishes."

"I'm not your lady," she fired back. "Not as long as the Devil has his claws in you."

He frowned, seemingly torn between his two selves. Then he gave another bow, retreating behind his aristocrat's polished veneer. "Good night, Zora. Or rather," he said, eyeing the pale dawn sky, "good morning. If you change your mind about wanting a bed, *any* bed, it's yours for the taking."

She knew exactly which bed he wanted for her.

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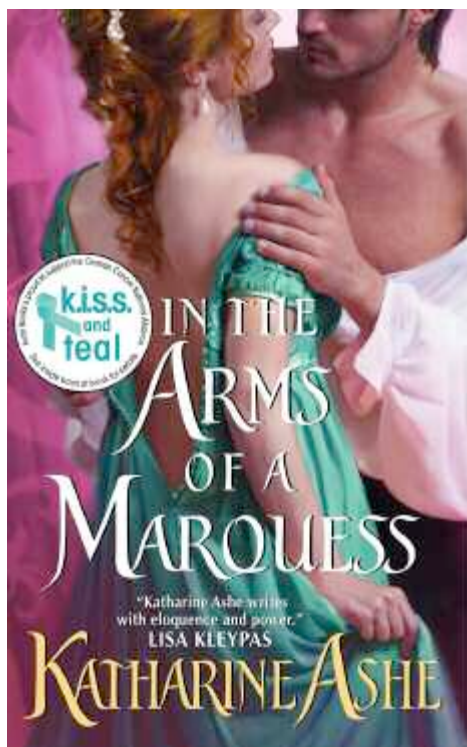
Zoë Archer is an award-winning romance author who writes stories that are chock full of adventure, sexy men, and women who make no apologies about kicking ass. Her *BLADES OF THE ROSE* series—featuring dashing men and fearless women—is available now. Her sci-fi romance, *COLLISION COURSE*, is now available from Carina Press, and December 2011 marks the launch of a new paranormal historical series, *THE HELLRAISERS*.

Zoë lives in Los Angeles with her husband, fellow romance author Nico Rosso.

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IN THE ARMS OF A MARQUESS

KATHARINE ASHE



She had never forgotten him...

Miss Octavia Pierce is witty, well off, and shockingly unwed.

Still, she is far too successful in society to remain on the shelf forever, and her family has hopes that Octavia will finally make the perfect match. What they do not know is that years earlier

Octavia was scandalously tempted by the one man capable of

sweeping her off her feet—the man now known as the Marquess of Doreé.

A third son, never meant to inherit, Lord Ben Doreé has abandoned his past and grown accustomed to his illustrious new position of wealth and power. But he has never forgotten Octavia, and now she desperately needs his help in a most dangerous, clandestine matter. Although she claims she has put the memories of the passion they shared behind her, Ben is determined to once again have her in his arms—and in his bed.

After nearly three decades of denying most of his desires, Ben's resistance to temptation was crumbling. Each time she lifted her liquid gaze to him across a room full of people, he was twenty-two again, fantasizing about peeling the clothing from her lovely curves and making her body come alive to him, as he had done so briefly in that moonlit garden.

But she was another man's. It did not need Crispin's proprietary gestures and words to bear that home. She was the portrait of a composed society lady, just as she had been in Ben's house in town, so different from that girl who for a moment had resurfaced in the ballroom.

She did not speak to Ben. But she looked at him. Often.

And it was unraveling him.

She could not deny the pull between them any more than he could. But given her betrothal, her purpose was clear to him now. Like all the females Ben preferred to ignore, she wanted to misbehave with him, a man on the edge of society, within it but forever foreign.

The trouble with Octavia Pierce was that Ben wanted to misbehave with her too.

He moved along the slate walk toward the formal garden and entered beneath the long, low trellised walkway. In the shade of the vine-covered path stood a woman. The woman he wanted.

At the sound of his footfalls on gravel she turned. The contemplative smile on her lips faded.

"Good day, my lord."

"Is it?" he replied without thought, without wisdom.

"The sky is clear and the sun bright. But now I hardly know whether the day is good after all."

She remained still as he moved toward her. She had never run away, and she would not now. Of this, he was certain.

"Does it require more than fine weather to render a day acceptable to you, Miss Pierce?"

"Why do you do that—speak to me as though we are strangers even when no one else is present?" She paused. "Except perhaps briefly at Lady Ashford's party."

He scanned her face. He had been wrong to relegate her girlhood entirely to the past. The slight sharpness of her chin was still there, the faintest dusting of freckles on the bridge of her nose, the single red-gold lock that escaped her chignon to dangle over her temple. Spellbinding details of a woman he once thought he knew but never did.

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"I was under the impression that we are, in fact, strangers," he replied.

Her gaze retreated, twisting something uncertain inside Ben. Mistaken uncertainty. She was like all the others. He must believe that.

"Strangers, you see," he added, "do not bother telling each other pertinent personal information."

"What do you mean?"

He lifted a brow.

"I did not—" She took a tight breath. "It was not my information to share at that time."

"If not yours, then whose, I wonder? Or does he like to be the showman, drawing the attention to himself as he did when he made the announcement of your betrothal in such grand style?"

"You were the one to call for champagne. What was that, gracious hosting or mockery?" The corners of her lips grew taut. He could soften them with barely a touch, he knew. Her mouth had always mesmerized him, mobile when she spoke her mind, exquisite when she smiled, and sweet as honey when he kissed her. Until it turned hot. Then it was beyond him to describe the things he imagined that mouth doing to him.

"Would it matter which?" He tried to rein in his thoughts, to no avail.

"I do not know, precisely. I have not quite decided, but you do not make it easy." Her gaze dropped to his lips.

"Thinking to trade up, were you?" he murmured, the rough quality of his voice unsurprising to him. "Crispin is only a baron, after all."

"No. No." A look of horror suffused her features. "You kissed me."

"You wanted me to." He stepped toward her. "You want me to again."

"No. Yes." She backed against a trellis post, a thin ray of light setting her hair aglow like the sky at sunset. "Yes, I did want you to kiss me. That does not make me a criminal. It only makes me—" She broke off, her gaze running across his chest and shoulders. "Rash."

"It makes you a liar, *shalabha*."

"Don't call me that. I know it makes me a liar, and I am not happy with myself."

"Would it bother him to know you are kissing other men?"

~ IN THE ARMS OF A MARQUESS ~ KATHARINE ASHE ~

"Of course it would. And I am not kissing other men, in the plural."

A hot finger of warning pressed at Ben's spine, but he took another step, closing the distance between them.

"Does he care so much for you, then?"

Her lips were parted. She pulled in audible breaths, but her shoulders were back, her chin high.

"He said he does."

"Do you return his sentiments?"

"That is none of your business."

The heat intensified, grabbing at Ben's gut and spreading. He flattened a palm on the post beside her head.

"Then you do not."

"That is not what I said. What are you doing? Don't kiss me again." Her lashes fanned, her breasts lifting upon short inhalations to press at the edge of her gown, beautiful swells of woman. He bent his head.

"Please do not," she whispered. "I may have changed my mind about wanting you to kiss me."

"Walk away."

Her gaze swam. "What?"

"You are not bound to that trellis." Her scent filled his senses, Indian roses like he hadn't known in years, rich and wild, moonlight in a garden and a girl in his arms he could not touch enough. "Walk away now."

"I want to, but m-my legs—"

"Losing your courage?" He slid his hand over her hip and she exhaled a sharp sound. His palm moved along her thigh, his blood pounding. This was insanity. She belonged to another man. She was soft, slender, her gown tangling in his fingers like it had that night, driving him mad, only to find nothing beneath but her. Pure beauty. At that moment in the tropical garden with his hands on her damp, satin skin, doubt had seeped into his pleasure. But he had wanted her too much to listen to the warning.

"No." Her whisper was barely audible.

"Then walk away."

"I cannot." Her tone pleaded. "My knees are too unsteady. I will fall. But you could be a gentleman."

"I could." He brushed his cheek against hers, her trembling beauty working through him like strong wine. "But why would I?" He touched his lips to the spot of feminine grace beneath her ear where she was softest silk.

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He had not remembered poorly. She was perfect, her scent, her flavor, the intoxicating caress of her quick breaths against his skin. "You want this." He trailed the tip of his tongue along the delicate sinew of her neck. She did not resist. Instead, she tilted her head back to allow him closer, a light sigh fluttering her throat. "And, I have been here before." He covered her breast with his hand.

A hard breath escaped her. Feeling her was torture, the supple shape of her fitting to his palm like he was meant to have her body in his hands.

"And here," he murmured and slipped his thumb beneath her chemise. She gasped and arched her shoulders as her body tightened for him, intoxicatingly rough with velvet all around. He stroked the peak, wanting to take it into his mouth, wanting to taste her again. Sliding his hand along her flat belly, he slipped it between her legs. "And here."

She moaned and sank into his touch. Ben curved his palm around the back of her neck and brought their mouths together. She opened to him, her lips and thighs, inviting him to touch her as he wished. He stroked into her wet mouth and with his hand cupped her. She was soft and supple and warm, accepting his caresses.

With effort he left her lips to trail kisses along her jaw, seeking sanity, but she was beautiful here too, smooth and perfect everywhere, and he didn't want to stop. Heat pounded in his chest and groin but doubt clamored in his head.

"You are being unfaithful to your betrothed," he murmured. She did not respond immediately.

"It's you," she finally whispered.

He went still, only his heartbeats battering a quick tempo. "Because of who I am."

"Of course."

Ben's chest constricted. He released her and stepped back.

"It is unfortunate for you then, madam, that I have had enough women like you to last me a lifetime."

Her eyes were pools of dazed astonishment, her lips swollen and hair loose where his fingers had twined through it. Blast it, she didn't look like those other women. She looked hurt and shocked—this woman who kissed a man who was not her betrothed as though she were free to do so—and he could look no longer.

He moved toward the trellis' exit.

"Damn you, Benjirou Doreé. Damn you!" she shouted after him like a Madras dockworker.

~ IN THE ARMS OF A MARQUESS ~ KATHARINE ASHE ~

He paused, half turned from her. "Damning me for your own transgressions? Then as well as now, I suspect."

"I waited for you."

He knew he must move or speak, but he could not.

"I did. I actually waited for you, somehow imagining you would return. I was such a fool. I should have known better. I should have realized you knew it was wrong, meeting like that in secret."

He struggled for steadiness.

"Lie to yourself," he finally said, a lifetime of control assuring the indifference of his tone. "Lie to the both of us, as you wish. Then as now, it is all the same to me." He strode from beneath the trellis.

It had to be all the same, lies and truth. For seven years he had nursed regret and anger, pretending he had forgotten. It could not be undone now with a few words, especially not when her hand bore another man's ring. But the warmth of the afternoon sun beat down upon him like a curse, like the golden tropical days he had spent in her company. And just as then, he wanted her.

He wanted her still.

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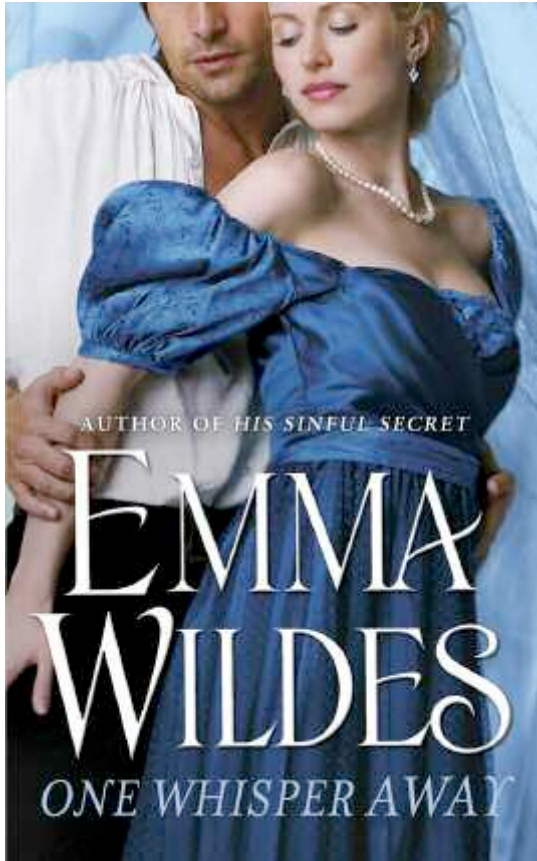
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Booklist named Katharine Ashe among its "New Stars of Historical Romance" and her debut, *Swept Away by a Kiss*, was a 2010 Reviewers' Choice Best Book Award nominee. A professor of European history, Katharine lives in the wonderfully warm Southeast with her husband, son, two dogs, and a garden she likes to call romantic rather than unkempt.

Harper Collins Publishers will donate proceeds from the sale of In the Arms of a Marquess to benefit Ovarian Cancer research and awareness.

~SINFULLY DELICIOUS TRUFFLES~
ONE WHISPER AWAY ~
EMMA WILDES



Although he's inherited his title legitimately, he's known as Earl Savage for his exotic background. Jonathan Bourne disdains his English heritage equally, until he meets the enchanting daughter of a duke and Lady Cecily convinces him that a protracted stay in London might not be such a bad idea...

It has been brought to my attention perhaps I owe you an apology for my *outré* behavior.”

Drat. No, double drat.

It was *him*.

Cecily pasted on her most gracious smile and plotted how to escape as soon as possible before turning around. That voice. She’d know it anywhere. The vowels were too rounded, the consonants not hollowed but somehow richer, and she caught a whiff of his cologne, which was also unfamiliar but intriguingly masculine.

Earl Savage.

She turned, looked up into velvet dark eyes, conscious of the crowded salon, the musicians on the dais tuning their instruments. The room was large, but it suddenly seemed very small, as if he was much, much too close, when in truth, he was an appropriate distance away, standing by the chair next to hers.

Dissembling about the current furor wasn’t a viable option. She wasn’t very good at it anyway, and for moral reasons was opposed to lying, but she also found that even if you were able to convincingly submit a falsehood and have it accepted, more than half the time you were tripped up later, so what the point of it?

She opted for saying coolly, “There’s no need for an apology, my lord.”

“I’m told there is.” He didn’t precisely grin but his mouth twitched suspiciously and he definitely did not look repentant as to her chagrin he chose the vacant seat next to her, and sank into it in a graceful athletic movement, stretching out his long legs.

To her right, Eleanor gave what could only be interpreted as a gasp of dismay. Joining them without an invitation was hardly what a polite gentleman would do, but it appeared that didn’t concern him.

Instead of apologetic, he looked quite...deliciously male. His dark coat was perfectly cut, and the contrast of his snowy cravat with his bronze skin dramatic. He would no doubt be that color all over, Cecily imagined involuntarily. Every inch of him, and...

That supremely unladylike thought came from nowhere. Never had she imagined any of the gentlemen of her acquaintance without their clothing. That she’d done so now was mortifying.

His regard was almost unsettlingly direct. “You haven’t repeated what I said to you, which I suppose is just as well, but it has caused a great deal of speculation. I’ve heard there is actual wagering over what it might have been. Are all you aristocrats that bored and shallow?”

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The insult stung, especially since he'd caused the problem in the first place. Though, if she admitted it, she secretly agreed with him. People were starving in the streets and wealthy young men were tossing money away on a single whispered sentence in a society ballroom. The frivolous waste bothered her more than the gossip.

"Lord Augustine, I hate to state the obvious, but *you* are a member of the class you just disparaged."

His teeth flashed dazzling white in a swift smile. "Am I? Oddly enough, I don't seem to quite fit in. At best I only half belong and I am perceptive enough to realize the difference between myself and the lofty *ton* is not based alone on the color of my skin."

He leaned so close she could feel the warm whisper of his breath on her temple and he said so only she could hear, "You look very beautiful tonight, and while I admire that particular shade of rose on you, I am certain you would look even better unadorned. Can we continue this discussion later?"

Since she had just been thinking the same thing—but with a different slant—to her chagrin, she blushed. She could feel the warm rise of blood through her neck and heat her cheeks. She was rarely at a loss for words, but his bluntness robbed her of the ability to fling back a swift retort.

So did his overwhelming masculinity. The width of his shoulders was daunting; and even seated and seemingly relaxed he gave the impression of power...and maybe even danger.

He went on in a conversational tone as if they were discussing the weather, "My personal views on the attitudes of the English nobility aside, is there something I can do to repair the damage? You know better than I do, I'm sure."

To her surprise, he sounded sincere when she would have sworn he was the kind of man who cared very little for convention.

At last she found her voice. "It *has* gotten to be ridiculous."
"Tell him not coming over and sitting next to you might help."

Eleanor, who had been listening unabashedly to every word, hissed furiously in her ear. "People are staring again."

Cecily did her best to ignore her sister, but no doubt she was right. Unfortunately Lord Augustine proved to have extremely good hearing. He said mildly, "Your sister is probably correct, but I am not ravishing you on the floor in public. We are just having a conversation. How can there be any cause for alarm in that?"

"People will think you are paying attention to me," she explained, wondering if the room was really overheated or if his proximity was the problem.

"I certainly hope I am as we are currently speaking to each other."

"I mean—"

"I know what you mean, Lady Cecily." The interruption was softened by a humorous quirk of his arched dark brows. "They will think I have a romantic interest."

Do you?

She almost said it out loud, partially because of the way he was looking at her, but maybe more because of how *she* was looking at *him*.

To her dismay the music was starting, which meant he had to leave now or it would be rude of him to get up and change seats during the performance. Not that she was positive it would deter him, but she sensed his disregard for society was based more on a lack of affectation than a lack of manners.

The soft sound of the violin began; the strains floating out and the murmured conversation fading.

Then he did it again. He leaned so close she could feel the warm whisper of his breath on her temple and he said so only she could hear, "You look very beautiful tonight, and while I admire that particular shade of rose on you, I am certain you would look even better unadorned. Can we continue this discussion later?"

*

So much for good intentions.

He entirely blamed the duke's beguiling daughter. Jonathan rose and went back to join his two sisters. Both Carole and Betsy, pretty and dressed in the new gowns he'd paid a fortune to the fashionable modiste to make up quickly for this event because Lillian insisted both their wardrobes outdated and too girlish, cast him curious glances.

~SINFULLY DELICIOUS TRUFFLES~

Maybe it wasn't entirely correct that what just happened was Lady Cecily's fault. He shouldn't have confessed he was sitting next to her imagining her naked. Those sorts of fantasies were best left unsaid, but truthfully the sensual beauty of her bared shoulders and the hint of the upper swell of her luscious breasts distracted him from his original purpose, which had been to correct his earlier offense.

And then he just compounded the problem.

If she hadn't blushed so becomingly earlier, maybe he would have been more circumspect.

Maybe.

He was the son of a daughter of a French soldier and an Iroquois maiden, and also the product of her union with an English earl. He wasn't used to being less than himself at any time. The trouble was; as a man raised between not two cultures, but three, he just didn't worry over conformity because he didn't fit precisely into any part of his heritage.

Or it was *part* of the trouble. The other part was Lady Cecily's incomparable allure. He wasn't used to being so drawn to a female. Yes, he'd known many beautiful women—enjoyed them sexually on a mutually casual basis—but as James had pointed out, she wasn't available.

He was a warrior and the duke's daughter was a most delectable prize...except he was sitting in a very formal drawing room in one of the most civilized cities in the world and the object of all eyes.

Damn.

The only redeeming part of it all was the music was actually performed with a modicum of talent, the musicians brought in from Vienna, and he enjoyed the performance enormously compared to the usual amateur recitals he'd been subjected to since his arrival in England.

Did the winsome Miss Francis play, he wondered, acutely aware of her across the room, the languid wave of her fan sensual and tantalizing. Her head was slightly bent, her profile delicate, and though he did his best to keep his attention on the string quartet, her presence was very distracting.

She hadn't answered his question.

What he couldn't precisely explain was how he needed to sweep the potential of any scandal under the proverbial rug as swiftly as possible for the sake of his sisters and daughter, or how anxious he was to return to his native country.

~ ONE WHISPER AWAY ~ EMMA WILDES ~

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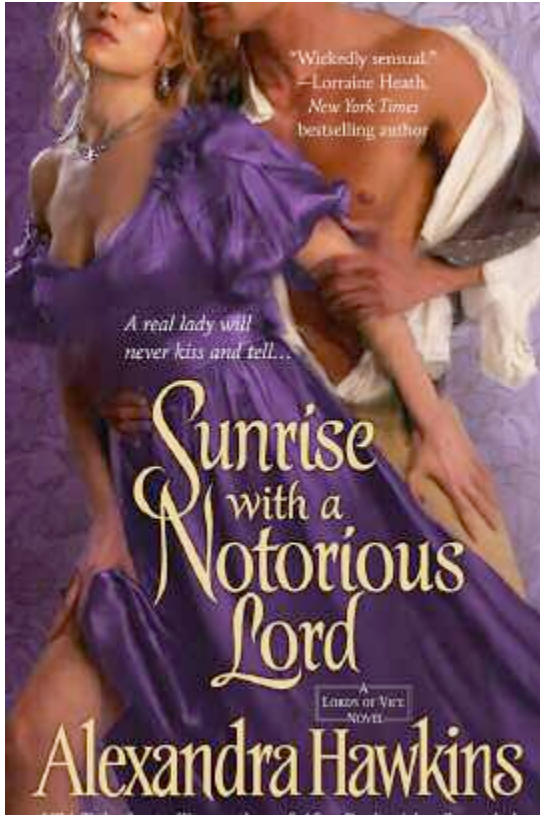
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Emma Wildes grew up loving historical romance, so turning to writing seemed a natural course. She is the award-winning author of over thirty books, and currently writes Regency for Signet Eclipse (NAL).

~SINFULLY DELICIOUS TRUFFLES~
SUNRISE WITH A NOTORIOUS LORD
~ ALEXANDRA HAWKINS



Dashing, decadent, and deliciously seductive, Christopher Courtland, Earl of Vanewright—or Vane—is a tried-and-true bachelor and he intends to stay that way. Why shackle himself to one lady when he’s free to sample them all? Then he meets the sharp-tongued Miss Isabel Thorne . . .

The fourth book in The Lords of Vice series

Vane had no intention of securing another mistress this season. With his mother continuously harping that he should cease his frivolous dalliances and find a genteel lady to take as his wife, it might bode well to give up females while his family resided in London.

Vane could almost hear his friends' snorts of disbelief and unabashed laughter at such a ridiculous notion. Each season, there were always a pretty lady or two who caught his eye. His liaisons were casual, flirtatious, and blessedly short-lived. When one of his lovers began hinting about marriage or arrangements that required solicitors and annual annuities, the back of his neck began to itch, an irksome sign that it was time to break with the lady.

Absently Vane slid his hand to the nape of his neck and scratched just below his hairline, convinced the unpleasant parting with the vivacious Bridget Corsar had been inevitable.

"No, not that one," a crisp authoritative feminine voice instructed, distracting Vane from his gloomy thoughts. "Let us take a closer look at the blue."

Vane grinned. How fortuitous attractive females were indeed as plentiful as pins in a dressmaker's shop!

Intrigued, he abandoned his post near the curtain and strolled to one of the tables. To his right, two beautiful golden-haired Venuses were admiring the evening dress a female shop clerk had displayed on a bare wooden table.

"Too staid," the taller of the twosome declared. "The bodice is clearly designed for a mature lady. Isabel, perhaps, you might want to consider this dress for yourself?"

Turning away, Vane masked his soft laugh by coughing into his hand. The younger one, and most likely the other woman's sister, had unsheathed her sharp claws. He circled around the table piled with bolts of colorful cloth so he could discreetly observe the battle of wills.

"Delia, since this is our first visit to London, I recommend prudence for our introduction into polite society. After all, do you want to be mistaken for a demirep?"

As Vane caressed the satin cloth on the table, he was unable to conceal his amusement. Even if she had been dressed provocatively, no one would have mistaken Isabel for a courtesan. Oh, she certainly caught a man's eye with a stature that rivaled her taller younger sister. Such long limbs were meant to be wrapped around a man's hips. Preferably his. Vane shook his head at the unbidden thought. It was a damn pity he was giving up his wild ways this season.

~SINFULLY DELICIOUS TRUFFLES~

From his limited view, only Isabel's profile was visible with most of her golden hair tucked under her simple bonnet. Her face seemed pleasing enough. It was not the lack of adornment that dispelled the suggestion that she could be in the market for a new protector. No, it was her mannerisms and speech, which marked her as a lady. Her no-nonsense approach with her sister reminded Vane of his older sister, Susan.

The younger sister, he mused silently, had the look and temperament of a courtesan. Unlike her older sister, Delia dressed to catch a man's gaze and wanted him to admire her sleek body. Her hair, a lighter hue than her sister's, had been curled into dozens of ringlets. Vane suspected if he approached the ladies and invited them to join him for pastries at Gunter's, Delia would accept without thinking of the risks to her reputation while Isabel might slap his face for his boldness.

For a gentleman who was too accustomed to willing females, getting slapped by the intriguing Isabel held more appeal because of the challenge she unwittingly presented to him.

As Vane silently mulled over his tactical approach, the shop clerk presented another unfinished dress for the ladies' inspection.

"Oh, Isabel." Delia cooed as the female shop clerk laid the vibrant poppy-colored evening dress over the insipid blue both ladies had rejected. "I adore the lace and wadded hem," she said, stroking the stomacher made up of double rows of gold lace. "We *must* purchase it."

Vane watched as Isabel nibbled her lower lip. Unlike her sister, she did not reach out to touch the elegant evening dress, but he saw the flicker of yearning in her expression.

"How much?" Isabel murmured, glancing about to make certain no one had heard her vulgar question.

"Really, Isabel," Delia huffed. "Mama would be disappointed to hear you speak like a tradesman."

Isabel held up her hand and silenced her sister's tirade.

Quite unexpectedly, she looked away from the table and her gaze locked with his. Although he did not visibly react, he felt the impact of the connection as if the lady had indeed slapped him. There was no coyness or surprise in Isabel's frank perusal. It was as if she had been aware of his presence all along.

Before he could collect his thoughts, she severed the invisible current of energy between them by abruptly shifting her attention to the shop clerk as the woman quietly responded to Isabel's query.

"May I have a private word with my sister?"

The woman nodded and quickly withdrew. She was probably relieved that she would not be drawn into the simmering argument between the two ladies.

Delia touched the poppy-colored skirt in a possessive fashion. "We should purchase the dress."

"Delia." Isabel sighed. "We could purchase two evening dresses for the price of this one."

"Do not try to tell me that you do not covet this dress," her sister said, seizing Isabel by the wrist and encouraging her to feel the quality of the cloth. "Does it not feel glorious? A lady would look like a queen in such a dress."

Isabel's frown softened into something akin to wistful as her fingers traced the gold lace patterns at the bottom of the skirt. In that moment, Vane decided that he was going to buy her the dress. Her sister was correct. Isabel would look as regal as any queen if she entered a ballroom wearing the poppy-and-gold evening dress.

The regret in her eyes did not prevent Isabel from shaking her head. "To own such a dress . . . it is a grand dream, but it isn't practical. Not when we have other expenses."

Vane had heard enough. He had entered the dressmaker's shop with the intention of purchasing a new wardrobe for his former mistress to ease his guilt over his unwarranted dismissal. One more dress would not beggar him. As the Earl of Vanewright, he had plenty of wealth at his disposal. He was also the Marquess of Netherby's heir. To gain their favor, he would have happily purchased Isabel and her sister a dozen dresses.

Although he was still pondering the many virtues of abstaining from the pleasures of the flesh this season, there was no harm in a casual flirtation with the pretty sisters. A smile from the too serious Isabel would be worth the cost of the dress. He moved away from the table and took a step toward the quietly quarreling women.

From his left, a lanky youth bumped into him.

Vane grunted softly as the corner of the table dug into his hip. To balance himself, he caught the lad by the arm.

"Begging yer pardon, milord," the youth mumbled, and tugged on his cap. He stepped out of reach and gave Vane a self-depreciating grin. "Clumsy as a three-legged lamb, I am."

The young man had taken three steps when Vane realized the snuff-box he kept in the inner pocket of his waistcoat was missing. He groaned, annoyed at himself for being so careless. "You!" He pointed an accusing finger at the retreating youth. "Give me back my property!"

His accusation caught the attention of everyone in the shop,

~SINFULLY DELICIOUS TRUFFLES~

including the young pickpocket who had halted at Vane's booming command. The thought of being transported or hanged for his theft, prompted the lad into action. He jumped over the table in his path, shoving bolts of cloth and frippery to the floor.

Several ladies cried in surprise and dismay as Vane dashed after his nimble quarry. Though he rarely used snuff, the jewel-encrusted box was valuable and he refused to be bested by a petty criminal.

The pickpocket ran a reckless course to the door, shoving aside anything or anyone who got in his way. Glancing over his shoulder at Vane, he did not see that a new obstacle had presented itself.

Isabel.

The young woman had stepped in the pathway of the fleeing youth. Delia cried out her sister's name as the pickpocket collided into Isabel and the pair fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs and fabric.

Isabel appeared momentarily dazed by the impact. It was not until the lad tried to crawl away that she seized him by the ankle. Her other hand clamped onto his arm.

Of all the mad things to do!

Fortunately, Isabel was no match for the desperate pickpocket. He freed himself with a forceful kick and staggered to his feet. He was out the door before anyone could stop him. Vane pursued the lad through the open doorway, prepared to chase him to the outskirts of town. His head snapped right and then left as he searched the crowded walkway and street for his quarry. The youth had simply vanished.

Damn . . . damn . . . damn!

Vane stomped back into the dressmaker's shop, furious that he had not gotten his hands on the pickpocket. The sight of Isabel sitting on the floor surrounded by her sister and several well-meaning albeit useless bystanders made him want to snarl at someone.

With her straw bonnet askew and her hands clasped together, Isabel gave him a hesitant smile. "Good sir, the pickpocket might have escaped you, but he was denied his prize."

Her clasped hands parted, revealing his jeweled snuffbox.

The people around them cheered and applauded Isabel for her heroics as Vane scowled down at the snuffbox cupped in her gloved hands. Even though he had been denied the pleasure of throttling the clever pickpocket, the foolishly brave lady sitting on the floor would not escape his fury.

"Never have I witnessed such a daft spectacle in my life!"

Isabel's smile faded at the furious declaration. If she had expected to be praised for her courage, the enraged gentleman towering over her was about to amend her expectations. Granted, she had never done anything so brazen in her young life, but she had come to London for new opportunities and a little adventure, had she not?

"You should be commending Isabel for her bravery, sir!" Delia rose from her crouched position to full height. "After all, she did manage to retrieve your expensive trinket from the pickpocket."

"Isabel," the gentleman said, enunciating each syllable of her name as if he was uttering a curse, "has less sense than an addled child rushing toward danger instead of away from it." He jammed his fists into his hips and glared at her. "I would have caught the lad if you had not stumbled into his path and ruined everything!"

Isabel did not care if she was being chastised by the King himself. No one spoke to her in such an insulting manner. "I ruined everything? I did?"

His smile was humorless and full of masculine smugness. "Yes!"

With a growl of outrage, Isabel flung the snuffbox at the condescending man's head.

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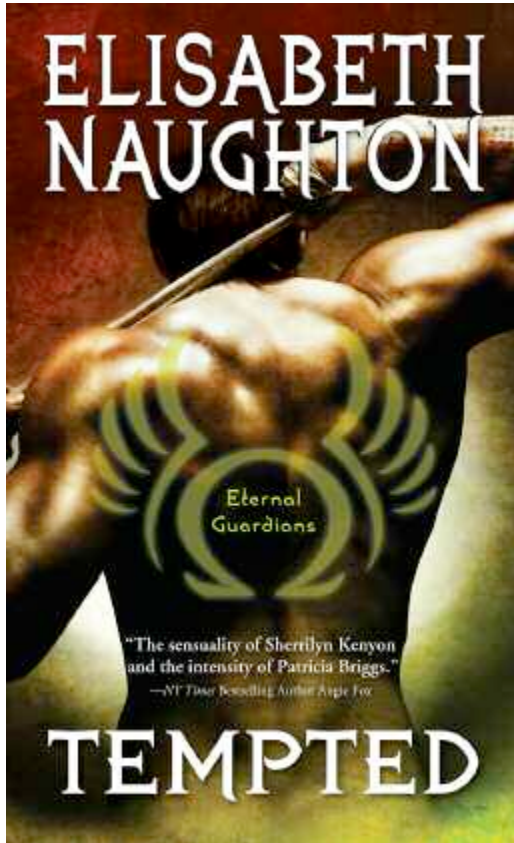
Alexandra Hawkins is an unrepentant Anglophile who discovered romance novels as a teenager and knew that one day she would be writing her own.

She has combined her love of English history, mythology, and romance to create sensual character-driven stories that, she hopes, will touch readers' hearts.

~ DELECTABLE BONBONS ~

TEMPTED

ELISABETH NAUGHTON



A dangerous secret. An even darker desire.

As daemons ravage the human realm, one Guardian's loyalty will be put to the ultimate test. Salvation hinges on a secret he's vowed to keep hidden and a smoldering desire he can never give in to.

No matter how tempted he may be...

Isadora sensed Demetrius's presence even before she rolled her head and found him lying next to her, sound asleep on his side, his arms crossed over his middle and his head tipped her way.

Confusion hit first, followed by surprise. Why in Hades had he lay down next to her, when he'd made it perfectly clear last night that he didn't want to have anything to do with her?

The things he'd said came back full force, as did the mortification when she remembered what she'd done with him. Rolling quietly away, she tugged the blanket around herself and crossed the floor toward the stone table in the middle of the room.

The clothes he'd brought for her were scattered over the floor. Cheeks heating with memories of his mouth, his hands, how she'd all but begged for more, she stooped to pick them up, then dragged them on. The shorts were baggier than she liked, but they were better than nothing.

Her gaze strayed to Demetrius, still sound asleep, and her temper kicked up. She moved around the table and flipped open the lid of the first trunk, looking for...she didn't know what. Just something that would help her get the hell off this island. Not his type? Screw him. *He* wasn't *her* type. Mean definitely wasn't her type. Why on earth had she ever thought he wasn't the bastard he'd always been back home?

She moved to the next trunk and silently rejoiced when she found a sword. She turned the blade in the low torchlight still burning from last night and figured it would do. It wasn't as big as the one Demetrius carried, but it fit better in her hand.

She turned for the steps, then belatedly remembered the spell book she'd seen in Jason's chest.

She set the sword down in front of her, pawed through the contents of the trunk until she found the book. The cover was dusty, and she blew until the grime cleared and the Helios symbol became visible in the aged leather.

"Aren't we curious this morning?"

Isadora's heart lurched into her throat. She dropped the book, grasped the sword, and whipped around with her arm outstretched. The tip of the blade stopped centimeters from Demetrius's bare chest.

His eyes flicked down to the weapon, then lifted to rest on hers. "I see sleep did you well. You obviously remembered all those reasons you hate me."

Her heart pounded hard against her ribs. Relief that it was him and not some monster pissed her off more than if she'd

found herself face-to-face with a Hydra. "No, I just remembered your legendary cruelty."

"Very good, Princess."

His low, mocking tone clawed at her self-respect, heated her cheeks, and made her remember all over again what she'd done last night. With him. In this very room. The difference was, to her it had meant something. To him it was...

She didn't know what it was to him. A game, she guessed. One more way to humiliate her.

He took a step forward, until the tip of the blade pressed into his chest but didn't break the skin. "Do it. Now's your chance."

She eased up on her tiptoes, slid her hand around his neck, and tugged. He was so tall she couldn't reach his mouth on her own, but he took the cue easily. And then his lips were on hers and all the hurt and anger from this morning seemed like a distant memory.

She wanted to. She was so angry she could barely see straight. Every one of his cruel words over the years crashed in to remind her of the thousands of times he'd belittled her. And that, coupled with the newfound fear, made her unsteady. But when he moved closer still, and the tip pushed deeper, she tensed. Her eyes shot to his chest and to the tiny droplet of blood that trickled down the blade.

Yes, she was angry, and yes, she hated that he made her feel anything at all, but she didn't want this. She didn't want to hurt him just because he'd hurt her.

"Go ahead, Princess," he whispered. "All you have to do is push."

Her eyes lifted to his, and though she saw indifference in his black irises, she also saw something else. Lurking deep, there lingered...regret.

Her heart stuttered, caught, and picked up speed as she stared at him. The night before spiraled through her memory again, only this time she didn't focus on his words. This time she focused on the look of desire in his eyes, the way he'd touched her, the fact he hadn't been able to get enough of her. And she

remembered the way he'd told her to tell him to stop, and when she hadn't, how he'd finally let down his guard and taken her places she never knew existed.

He'd wanted her, and it scared the crap out of him. So much, he'd reverted to his old ways to convince her he was the enemy. She lowered the sword, even as her heart raced beneath her breast.

"Your father's right," he muttered. "You're no leader."

His words cut to the heart of her, to every one of her insecurities and what she feared most in this world. But she didn't dwell on them. For whatever reason, he was trying to make her hate him. And his baiting words belied his actions. Those were what she focused on.

She turned the sword and held out the handle to him. "Maybe I'm not. But I know a lie when I see one."

For just a split second, confusion crossed his features. And then the mask came up again, the one that said *Fuck you* to the world and *Leave me the hell alone*. But that wasn't the real him. The *real* him was the one who'd rescued her more times than she could count, watched over her, and pleased her so completely last night without taking a single thing for himself in the process.

His fingers wrapped around the handle of the blade, and as he lowered it to the ground, she knew she had a choice. To let him go on believing that lie or prove to him he was wrong.

She moved into him without a second thought. Just as she had last night, except this time she wrapped both arms around his waist and held on tight.

He tensed, and beneath her ear his heart rate kicked up speed.

The reaction warmed her, told her yeah, she was definitely right. He was trying to keep her away from him. Though she didn't understand why, she wasn't about to let him win. Last night *had* meant something to her. And it had obviously meant something to him as well, if it had spurred him into using his old, cruel tactics on her again.

"Wh-why are you doing this?"

"Because you won't." She wiped the droplet of blood from his chest, then softly pressed her lips to the wound that was already healing. She wanted him to know she was serious, that this—*he*—mattered. Because something inside her sensed he never really had before.

Seconds passed as they stood frozen together. For a moment she thought he was going to draw away. And then the blade clat-

tered to the floor at her feet and his large, warm hands landed gently on her shoulders and slid down her back.

Yes. *Yes.*

She closed her eyes, burrowed closer, and hung on to the feeling. The same one she'd experienced last night when he'd kissed her and touched her and made her want.

"Why are you so damn stubborn?" he whispered.

"Why are you so hell-bent on pushing me away?"

"Because I'm no good."

His blunt words drew her back, forced her eyes up. The dim light cast a warm glow over his face, made his skin look darker, the week's worth of beard thicker, his eyes blacker. But there was an odd sort of truth in his words. A truth she didn't understand but wanted to know.

What had happened to him? What had he done or seen in his two hundred years that made him honestly believe that he wasn't good enough for her?

"Good is a matter of opinion, Demetrius. And as far as I'm concerned, nothing about you isn't good enough."

"Isadora—"

She didn't want to argue. She knew she wasn't going to change his mind with words. What she wanted was the chance to make him believe.

She eased up on her tiptoes, slid her hand around his neck, and tugged. He was so tall she couldn't reach his mouth on her own, but he took the cue easily. And then his lips were on hers and all the hurt and anger from this morning seemed like a distant memory.

Gods, he tasted good, felt even better. Days ago she'd sat on that beach, watching him strap those boards together, scared to death about the prospect of being stuck here alone with him for any length of time. And now...now a part of her ached at the thought of their time ending before their bond had a chance to solidify.

His hands slid up to frame her face, and he tipped her head, kissed her slow and deep and so thoroughly, she felt it all the way in her toes. And when he eased back to look down at her with those stormy, emotion-filled eyes, she knew she was right.

"This," he said softly, "is a bad idea. You know that, don't you?"

She smiled because this—what was happening between them—was really the least of their problems on this island. "Why are you so convinced doom is lurking around every corner?"

"Because it usually is." A frown turned his lips. "Once you go home, this—I—will just be one giant regret you'll look back on and wish you could change."

And he was trying to prevent that. Suddenly, his words and actions last night and this morning made a whole lot more sense. "I doubt that."

"I don't."

She rubbed her fingers down the back of his hand and leaned into his touch. "Sometimes the most important things in this world are the ones we have to fight for. I don't believe you're not worth fighting for, Demetrius. Even if you do."

"*Kardia*—"

Her heart swelled at the term of endearment he used without even realizing it. And as she pressed her lips into his palm and kissed him gently, she had the strangest sense he'd called her that last night. After she'd fallen asleep. After he'd come back and lay down next to her.

Whatever doubt she'd carried slithered away. He wasn't the stone-cold bastard she'd always believed him to be. He was so much more. Now she just had to make him believe it, too.

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www.elisabethnaughton.com

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A former junior high science teacher, Elisabeth Naughton traded in her red pen and test tube set for a laptop and research books. She now writes sexy romantic adventure and paranormal novels full time from her home in western Oregon where she lives with her husband and three children. Her work has been nominated for numerous awards including the prestigious RITA® awards by Romance Writers of America, the Australian Romance Reader Awards, The Golden Leaf and the Golden Heart. When not writing, Elisabeth can be found running, hanging out at the ballpark or dreaming up new and exciting adventures.

~ DELECTABLE BONBONS ~
TOUCH OF A THIEF
MIA MARLOWE



When Viola Preston touches gem stones she sees visions. An occupational hazard, since the lady is a jewel thief. Greydon Quinn needs her help to recover a fabulous, but cursed, red diamond en route to the Royal Collection. He never expected “Lady Light-Fingers” to steal his heart as well!

~TOUCH OF A THIEF ~ MIA MARLOWE ~

The cursed "Blood of the Tiger" diamond, which has brought destruction to each of its former owners, is on its way to the Queen's Own Collection. Posing as newlyweds, Lady Viola Preston and Lt. Greydon Quinn plot to steal the dangerous red jewel from the British Embassy in Paris. While Quinn is a generous lover, he's less than forthcoming about other aspects of his life. Now that they've become intimate, Viola longs to know more about him, but whenever she asks him about his family or childhood, he slams the door on the discussion. He especially refuses to discuss the death of his older brother, which happened when they were both young boys. Since Viola is one of those rare individuals for whom "the rocks cry out," she decides to risk touching one of his gemstones, hoping her "gift of touch" allows her to peek into his secrets.

Getting back into the embassy will be no problem," Quinn said as he sopped up his eggs with a croissant. Even though he carried no excess flesh, all the man's appetites were large. "There's an embassy ball scheduled for tomorrow night and I wangled an invitation for us."

"Good. Climbing in windows is vastly overrated." Viola speared a slice of orange and popped it in her mouth. "I'm sure you realize a ball calls for another gown. I couldn't possibly be seen again so soon in the emerald one and all my other new ensembles, while very fine, are not appropriate for a formal occasion."

"We'll nip back to Madame Puisette's this afternoon, then. Her sample gowns fit you and I've a mind to see you in that burgundy one."

"It was terribly French. Most revealing." So was the deep neckline of his banyan. A few dark chest hairs peeped at her.

He flashed a wicked smile. "Which is why I want to see you in it."

"But there's a problem with going for the diamond during the ball." She considered helping herself to another scone, but decided against it. All her new things fit glove-tight. Besides, Quinn was the most delicious thing in the room. She was tempted to climb across the table and settle into his lap. "It may take a while to locate the ambassador's office and I might be missed. A floor plan of the building or, at the very least, directions would make my job easier."

"Not to worry," Quinn said as he rose. "I know how where the office is. I'm going with you."

"But I work alone."

"Not this time. I can't imagine making small talk and avoiding waltzes with Lady Wimby, while you're at risk. I'm coming too and

that's final." He leaned down to plant a kiss on her crown. "Besides if we're missed, we can claim we wanted some privacy. Newlyweds, you know."

Warmth pooled in her belly. "You play the devoted bridegroom with devastating conviction."

"And it may prove useful." He turned to go into the adjoining bath, leaving the door ajar. Viola heard the scraping sound of a blade stopped on leather as Quinn prepared to shave. "No one loves lovers like the French, after all. If we find ourselves in danger of being caught, we'll simply make sure we're caught *in flagrante delicto*. That should remove all suspicion."

If he'd been close enough and she'd been armed with a fan, she'd have swatted him with it. But a thrill of the forbidden made her juices swirl. What would it be like to engage in sexual congress knowing you might be caught mid-act at any moment? "You wicked man!"

"Alas, my love, you don't know the half of it."

My love. There it was again. Her heart fluttered. No, she wasn't his love. He was simply remaining in character in keeping with their ruse.

But the rest of his statement was deadly accurate. She still didn't know the half of Lt. Greydon Quinn, Lord Ashford. He held his past and personal life closer than a gambler clutches his cards.

Perhaps she could learn more about him without the effort of drawing him out.

He'd left his wrist studs, his uncle's snuffbox, the medal and signet ring on a salver on the lowboy. Viola glanced toward the lavatory door. Quinn was whistling a rather bawdy tune while he shaved.

She'd have time to touch one of the jewels at least. She couldn't be sure how long he'd owned the diamond studs and she despised the screech of diamonds. The medal for valor was ornamented by a small topaz. It would probably show her something military and she wasn't sure she had the stomach for seeing Quinn in mortal danger.

The signet ring would probably yield the most information since he'd been his father's heir for a couple decades and presumably had worn it often. The set was very old fashioned since the Ashford barony had been created before Cromwell. Heavy gold filigree surrounded a cabochon sapphire carved with the Ashford crest intaglio-style. It seemed to wink at her, tempting her with its secrets. If she was quick about it, perhaps she could avoid the sick

headache that accompanied prolonged use of her gift.

It was worth the risk.

She ambled over to the tray, cast one last look toward the bathroom door, and stretched out her hand for the ring. She picked it up by the gold circle and then pressed the carved crest into her palm.

The sapphire wailed like the damned.

*

Water shot up her nose. She couldn't breathe. A hand thrashed before her face, stubby fingers with nails bitten down to the quick. Sickly green light filtered through the murky water. The signet ring flashed on the right forefinger. A hand clawed the water. Yarn was wrapped around the backside of the heavy ring to make it fit the childish finger.

Her head broke the surface, but only long enough to gulp a quick breath. Arms and legs pumping furiously, a boy was running along the dock toward her.

No, not toward her. Toward the one in the water.

She struggled to separate herself from the vision, but she continued to see out the floundering child's eyes.

Arms flailing, she sank like a stone. Slimy dock posts wavered before her. Waterweed grasped at her ankles. Sediment sparkled in a shaft of dying sun.

She looked up. It was hard to tell how much water separated her from the surface. The boy knelt on the dock and leaned out, stretching a hand toward her. The whites showed all the way around his gunmetal gray eyes. His lips were moving. She could hear his voice, frantic and rising in pitch, but she couldn't make out any of the words. The hand with the signet ring strained upward, trying to catch hold.

She looked down at herself, past a bare flat chest with nipples no bigger than a pair of pimples, past a little boy's penis contracted to almost nothing, and on to the boy's feet. They were churning furiously, knobby knees rising and falling if he were running uphill.

She seemed to be moving upward, but not near fast enough. Her lungs burned for air.

Then a hand reached down into the water.

Relief melted her bones.

But instead of grasping the stubby-fingered hand and pulling her up, this hand settled on the top of her head, pushing her down. She thrashed and kicked. She clawed at the arm, but the hand wouldn't let go.

She tried to look up, but the hand held her immobile. Its long fingers wrapped around her skull like a vice. Her vision tunneled.

Then an explosion of bubbles escaped her lips and, muffled by water, one long wavering cry.

"Greydon!"

"Viola. Viola." The voice grew more urgent. She slitted one eyelid. Quinn loomed over her, his gray eyes wide.

Oh, God. The same eyes.

She squeezed hers shut. A claw sank its talons into the base of her brain, sending a shrieking message of pain. She shouldn't have held the ring so long.

But she hadn't been able to turn it loose. She'd never had such a vivid vision, never been inside the body of a jewel's previous owner before. She'd always been able to pull out of an unpleasant Sending, but this time, the jewel forced her to stay till the bitter conclusion of its tale. It sucked her in. Made her part of the ring's story. It was as if the ring demanded that she see, feel, *know*... something she fervently wished she didn't.

"Viola, what's wrong?" Quinn's voice cut through the pain. Someone was tapping her wrist and trying to make her sit up. "I'll call for a doctor."

He wrapped his arms around her and rocked, pressing her head to his chest.

"No," she murmured, forcing her eyes open. The screaming headache made her clamp them shut again. "No doctor, please."

A physician would only bleed her and make her weaker than she already was. Bile rose in her throat but she swallowed it back. If she allowed herself to be sick, she expected she'd spew murky green water. She tried to pull out of his embrace and rise to her feet.

"No, you don't." Quinn scooped her up and laid her flat on the bed. "Rest now."

She let herself sink into the feather tick and kept her eyes closed. She couldn't meet his gaze yet. Like Adam, who knew with just a look that Eve had eaten fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Quinn would see the damnable knowing in her.

What she'd experienced would shoot out her eyes without her conscious volition. He'd see that she *knew*.

Her heart had never felt so bleak. Thoughts darted through her mind like a school of fish, zipping this way and that before she could get a net around one.

Quinn. He wanted to be known as Quinn or called by his military rank, not his title. Not Lord Ashford. Now she knew the reason why.

Guilt.

Someone pressed a cool, wet cloth to her forehead and a

~TOUCH OF A THIEF ~ MIA MARLOWE ~

callused hand smoothed over her cheek. She smelled Quinn's scent. How could he be so tender and caring now and so cold then?

Oh, God! The torrent of sensations from last night's lovemaking washed over her. Her chest constricted. Why did she have this lump of feeling for him?

And such loathing for herself. What was wrong with her? She discovered she'd made love with a monster and it didn't seem to matter one particle to her wanton insides.

She'd hoped the ring would show her something of the man she'd given herself to. It did, but not as she'd expected. Instead, she was given a glimpse into the previous Lord Ashford. The ring yanked her into the last moments of life of Quinn's older brother, Reginald.

And showed young Quinn helping him drown.

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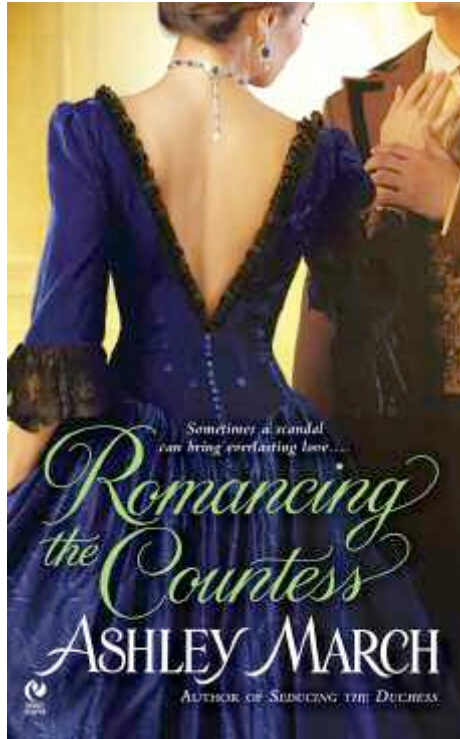
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www.MiaMarlowe.com

Mia Marlowe learned much of what she knows about writing from singing. A classically trained soprano, she gleaned the elements of storytelling while performing operatic roles. Since she's worn a real corset, and had to sing high C's in one, she empathizes with her historical heroines. But in Mia's stories they don't die in a freezing Parisian garret. They get to live and keep the hero! She describes her adventurous historical romances as a cross between Grand Opera and Gilbert & Sullivan . . . with sex! Mia's work was featured in PEOPLE magazine's Best of 2010 edition and received a rare starred review from Publishers Weekly. Her stories have been translated into 7 different languages. When she isn't drunk on the words of her latest Work-In-Progress, you can find her blogging several days a week at www.miamarlowe.com, where you can learn the latest about Mia's real and fictional worlds.

~ DELECTABLE BONBONS ~
ROMANCING THE COUNTESS ~
ASHLEY MARCH



One stormy night and a fatal carriage accident leave the Earl of Wriothesly and his best friend's widow sharing the scandalous secret of their spouses' affair...

Beg pardon, Mrs. George, but there's a gentleman here to see you."
Leah peered at the footman through the black shroud of her veil, the one she'd had to use as a substitute for a widow's cap in order to hide the fact that her eyes weren't red-rimmed, her face not pale and worn. It was beyond strange that someone should call on her, not only at her in-laws' house, but also so shortly after Ian's death. Not only come to

call, but actually expect to see her.

"Who is it?" she asked quietly, lowering her gaze to the navy trim of the hallway runner.

"The Earl of Wriothesly, madam. He's been waiting in the drawing room for two hours. He wished me to convey his apologies, but says it's most urgent that he speak with you."

"Yes, of course." With a nod of dismissal, Leah reversed her direction and turned toward the drawing room. In truth, she was surprised Wriothesly had waited this long to seek her out. Every day since Ian's death, she'd expected to see him, or to find a letter delivered at her door, at least. Not only because he'd been Ian's closest friend, but also because he must now know the truth of Ian's relationship with the Countess of Wriothesly.

God rest their souls.

Leah forced her fists to unclench as she entered the drawing room. Like all the other public rooms in the house, it still wore the mark of death: windows opened, blinds pulled down, the mirror covered in black cloth. The earl sat rigidly on the sofa, his gaze fixed on the opposite wall, the tea service before him untouched.

Here, Leah thought, was an example of true mourning. Although only his profile was visible from the doorway, grief was etched clearly on the stark planes of his face. His brow was pulled low, his lips tugged tightly inward, and the pale cast of his skin contrasted severely with the dark brown of his hair. Did he grieve for both of them? she wondered. If so, he was a far better Christian than she.

As her gaze touched upon the black ribbon tied around the hat he'd set to the side, his head swung toward her. He immediately stood and bowed. "Forgive me, Mrs. George. I wasn't aware of your presence."

Behind her veil, Leah's mouth almost curved. His execution of the niceties was exquisite, his countenance smoothing into all that was generous and hospitable, and yet his rebuke couldn't have been clearer: how dare she make a study of him while not announcing her arrival.

"Lord Wriothesly," she acknowledged with a curtsy. The distance between them was more than a matter of measurement; he seemed almost a stranger without Ian there as a bridge to provide them common ground. "You wished to speak with me?"

"Yes, I wanted to—" He stopped, frowning as his eyes narrowed on her veil.

Leah dropped her gaze accordingly, realizing belatedly that her voice had sounded a bit too bright.

"First, I wish to give you my condolences for your loss."

"And mine for yours," she returned, then watched as he inclined his head solemnly.

Oh, how well they each played their parts. Perhaps it was the requisite exchange of formalities, or the way Wriothesly appeared determined to skirt around a truth they both knew too well, but Leah suddenly found she didn't have the patience to continue this specific role. Not right now, not after spending the past year as the dutiful, perfect, and docile wife, pretending to everyone that all was as it should be. Even if he was in mourning, he needn't play this particular game of charades with her. After so much time spent in each other's homes, they'd moved past society's dictates for courteous acquaintances, hadn't they?

"Such a terrible accident, was it not?" she asked.

"Indeed." His mouth tightened, but he gave no other indication he heard the irreverence in her tone. Instead, he gestured toward the sofa behind him. "I believe this might be easiest if we sit."

Leah stared. He acted as if she needed coddling, to be prepared for distressing news. Surely he didn't think he needed to inform her of her own husband's infidelity?

"Mrs. George? Will you have a seat? Shall I ring a maid to pour the tea?"

She shook her head. "No tea, thank you." She walked forward, moving around him to sit on the sofa as he'd suggested, then waited as he lowered himself to the chair opposite. For a long moment, he made no move to speak, only adjusted the fitting of his black gloves. When he finally glanced at her again, Leah held up her hand. "Please, my lord, let's forsake this polite facade. I believe we're both aware of the nature of the relationship between Ian and Lady Wriothesly."

He blew out a harsh breath. "It wasn't a very discreet way to die, was it?"

"I agree. It was quite inconsiderate of them." Humor. It had been such a long time since she'd found anything to be amused by. How unfortunate that it happened to be at the expense of her dead husband and his lover.

Apparently this time Lord Wriothesly wasn't able to ignore the flippancy in her tone. Even through the safety of her veil, his eyes bored into hers, studying her until the black crepe seemed to have no more substance than the very air they breathed. Leah tilted her head and smiled.

His jaw clenched. "Either you've developed a very deep dislike for your husband in only a short time or you already knew of the affair."

"I believe it began four months after we were married, although I didn't find out until much later." And while she may have cursed him, screamed at him, she'd never found the strength to hate him. It had been easier to withdraw into herself, away from Ian, her family, all of society.

"Four months after . . . They've been having an affair for an entire *year*?" Wriothesly lurched to his feet and began pacing the room, one black glove burrowing through his hair. At length he halted at the other end of the drawing room, his back toward her, and stared at the closed blinds of the window.

Leah observed his agony from a distance. She wasn't without sympathy—God knew the hell she'd lived in when she too had discovered the truth. But she'd suppressed her own emotions for so long, it was almost embarrassing to see his put on such transparent display.

Then he lifted his arms, planted his hands against the wall, and bowed his head. As if he didn't have the strength to support himself.

Leah glanced away, only to find her gaze dragged back toward him a moment later. Perhaps she'd been mistaken to tell him, to draw him into the secret world she'd never shared with anyone else. Now, just by observing the slight tremble of his shoulders, she felt the wound she'd so carefully stitched together begin to unravel again.

She stood from the sofa, once more grateful for the veil's thin disguise. "Please excuse me, my lord. I should leave—"

"No." He whirled around, so quickly it took a moment for her to register the emotion on his face as not one of pain, but of rage. "You will not go."

Her spine instinctively straightened. "My lord?"

Wriothesly advanced toward her. "You should have told me when you realized what was going on between them. I had a right to know."

"Oh? And what was I to say? I beg your pardon, Lord Wriothesly, but your wife seems to have acquired a distinct liking for my husband's cock. Would you mind kindly retrieving her to your own bed?"

He froze. Stared at her.

Leah blinked. Dear Lord. She'd said *cock*.

Every sinew in her body thrummed with mortification and her throat ached with the need to stammer words of apology, but she pressed her lips together. The pleasure of that small act of rebellion surprised her, and as Wriothesly's eyes narrowed, Leah lifted her chin. A long moment passed in which they simply looked at each other. She was tempted to say it again, if only to see what his reaction would be to the second utterance.

Cock.

She tested the word in her mind. She'd never spoken it aloud before, didn't actually consider it a part of her vocabulary—just a sound relegated to a category of others too base and crude for a lady to use.

"I think we can both agree that Ian must have seduced her," Wriothesly ground out at last, his gaze flicking past her shoulder.

"Of course," she replied. She was disturbed by the contradiction between the opulence of his green irises and the scarcity of the eyelashes framing them. Although she still resented the countess, for a moment Leah could understand how easily Angela must have been swayed from her marriage vows. Compared to Ian's golden splendor and open charm, the earl would have appeared no more appealing than a mountain, all stark angles and planes, with nothing but the verdant color of his eyes to provide relief from his barren countenance.

"Regardless of exactly what transpired between them, or that you should have informed me of the affair when you discovered the truth, I've come to request a favor from you."

"Yes?"

He turned aside to pick up his hat. "Everyone believes Angela and Ian were traveling to Hampshire because she was ill."

"I've heard the story. Very well done, my lord. To have him, your dear and trusted friend, accompany her when you could not. And how convenient, isn't it, for Ian to have

planned to visit our own house in Wiltshire after seeing the countess safely home?" Leah paused, attempted to swallow the bitterness from her tongue. She added softly, "You must have loved Lady Wriothesly very much, to care about her reputation even now."

Wriothesly drew the black ribbon of his hat between his thumb and forefinger. "I would appreciate if you could concur with your part of the story. The reason why you couldn't accompany her instead of Ian—"

"A headache, yes. Don't worry, my lord. I've carried their secret for this long now. I have no need of divulging yours."

He met her gaze steadily. "Still, I would ask your word."

Leah gave a small laugh. "You don't believe me?"

"Please."

"Very well. I promise. If someone asks me the details of that day, I won't contradict you. And I will ensure my servants believe the same."

"Thank you, Mrs. George."

"You're welcome."

And as when she had first entered the drawing room, Lord Wriothesly bowed and Leah returned the gesture with a curtsy. He placed his hat on his head, gave a short nod, and walked toward the doorway—only to stop and turn around a moment later.

"By the way, Mrs. George, I would advise you to wear a widow's cap while indoors. Remove the veil. It doesn't hide anything."

Then, with another nod, he pivoted and left the drawing room.

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www.ashleymarch.com

When Ashley March isn't writing about sexy, headstrong heroes and intelligent, independent heroines in Victorian England, she stays busy entertaining her two young daughters, ignoring all the housework that needs to be done, and hiking in the beautiful foothills of Colorado.

~ DELECTABLE BONBONS ~

INFERNO'S KISS

MONICA BURNS



Dante Condellaire, heir to the Sicari Lords, knows that being a leader means sacrifice. For Dante it's relinquishing all erotic pleasures. But he never expected his willpower to be tested so fiercely by Cleopatra Vorenius, expert assassin of the Order, and daughter of the man he is positioned to succeed.

Across the expanse of the stone paved courtyard, Cleo saw Dante going through the slow movements of a martial arts exercise. Immediately, she experienced a quiet tranquility. It was an unfamiliar sensation, almost as if she was experiencing his calm state of mind. Fuck, what was she thinking? She couldn't sense emotions. Physical chemistry on the other hand. That the man had in spades, and she loved looking at him.

The only thing he wore was a pair of black, loose-fitting trousers. Entranced, she watched his leg come up in a slow high kick, his foot flexing inward with his muscular arms extended in perfect position. The muscles of his back rippled as he slowly descended from the high kick and sank down toward the ground.

In a controlled movement, his leg slid out to one side, while his entire body dropped into a low crouch until she couldn't see any space between his extended leg and the ground. As he moved, his hand followed the line of his inner thigh gliding toward his foot then up into the air. The slowly defined movements of his exercise displayed the power of his muscular arms and emphasized the strength in his legs.

She didn't budge an inch as she watched him move fluidly from one position to the next. It was like watching a large tiger in a confined area. Raw, lethal power hidden beneath the skin and the promise of blazing speed. Even if she'd wanted to, she couldn't have turned away because he was beautiful to watch. Her mind shifted gears as she imagined running her hands and mouth over his delicious looking chest, shoulders, and back. From there her imagination went a little wild as she pictured what else she'd like to do to the man.

The way he suddenly stiffened with a jerk then whirled around made her frown as she walked toward him. *Christus*, was the guy blushing? No, he couldn't be. It had to be exertion. It couldn't be anything else. Of course, if he'd been reading her mind—okay that thought didn't make her happy.

Telepathy was an intimacy that required permission among the Sicari, and she didn't care *how* glorious his body was, she'd not agreed to get that familiar with the man. On second thought, as gorgeous as his body was, it would be easy to forgive him a telepathic connection. And *Deus*, he did have a body. The color in his face deepened, and she eyed him suspiciously as she came to a halt in front of him.

Hell, the man looked like she'd caught him with his hand in a

cookie jar. Then again, maybe it made him uncomfortable to have her looking at him like he was a piece of candy. She swallowed hard. Sweet Juno, she was acting like woman who'd never seen a man before. Cleo's jaw clenched with irritation as she reminded herself that he'd abandoned her last night and taken his sweet time summoning her this morning. Not to mention how he'd sent Junior for her rather than coming himself.

"You wanted to see me?" Her irritation at the way he'd left her hanging for almost twelve hours came through loud and clear.

"Yes, we need to talk about what Angotti told you." Dante turned away from her and picked up a black martial arts jacket off the grass.

"Not until I have some assurances that I'll be included in the rescue operation," she said as she watched him shrug on the jacket then tie it closed.

As he knotted the sash around his waist, she noted his strong hands and long fingers. In the next breath she envisioned his hands caressing her breasts, his thumbs rubbing across her nipples until they ached for him to suckle her. The image made her wet, and she drew in a deep breath then released it in exasperation. *Merda*, she needed to stop thinking about the man's body and focus on the topic at hand. But damn, the man really was delicious eye candy. He was a red-hot waiting to happen on her tongue. An odd expression crossed his face as he met her gaze. For a second time, she had the distinct impression he was embarrassed.

"I have some concerns about adding you to the team."

"Like what?" Cleo narrowed her gaze at him. Did he know she had no special Sicari abilities? It was common knowledge in the Order that she was different. She flinched.

"You carried out an execution without a partner, *despite* knowing that the standing rule in Rome is that no Sicari goes out alone." There was a sharp edge to his voice that said he wasn't going to give way easily.

"I told you why I didn't take a partner," she snapped. "I would have needed to explain my reasons for grilling Angotti, not to mention my methods."

"It was reckless."

"Reckless implies that I rushed into the assassination without a plan, which isn't true. I planned Angotti's assassination carefully, and while the Praetorians were a bit of a surprise, I knew it was more than possible they might turn up," she said in a matter-of-fact

voice. "I weighed all the options and my plan was a risk I was willing to take. Angotti had information I wanted. If there had been another way to get it, I would have taken that route. There wasn't."

She worked hard to keep from appearing defensive as he studied her with a careful look she was already starting to recognize despite knowing him less than a day. As she studied his face, she could tell he was thinking long and hard about how to respond to her. Dante folded his arms across his chest and eyed her carefully. He knew. Cleo was certain of it. It was why he was looking at her like that. He was going to tell her she couldn't go with him on the mission because she wasn't a true Sicari.

"An assault on the convent is far too dangerous—"

"Don't. Don't even *think* of going there," she snapped fiercely. "Just because I don't have any Sicari abilities, doesn't mean I can't fight. Like *this*."

With a quick move, she kicked her foot out to hook it around the back of Dante's leg and tugged hard. He easily thwarted her attempt to drop him to the ground by twisting his body in mid-air as he fell backward. In less than a second he landed in a push-up position, and his foot lashed out at her leg. Cleo drew in a sharp breath as she narrowly missed the kick to the back of her calf. She was crazy. She'd just attacked a Sicari Lord.

Instinctively, she danced backward as he sprang upright. The expression on his face said he wasn't happy. No big surprise there. Invisible fingers wrapped around both her arms as he slowly used his telekinetic ability to draw her toward him. She knew better than to resist. Instead, she deliberately threw herself toward him.

The move surprised him, and she slammed into him, her momentum throwing him off balance. An instant later, he was on his back and she was on top of him. With her face inches from his, she was able to see the color of his eyes for the first time. They were the color of an angry sea at night. Dark blue and mysterious. *Christus*, his voice wasn't the only thing about him that would easily make a woman forget who she came to the party with.

As their gazes locked, she breathed in the tangy scent of spice. The potent male scent of him stirred up an image of a warm night, hot skin and tousled silk sheets. Beneath the palm of her hand, she could feel the racing beat of his heart. The sound of ragged breathing caught her attention. Was that sound coming from her?

No. Not just her. His breathing was as harsh and shallow as hers. The tension in him was palpable, and her own heartbeat

quicken as the sudden pressure of his erection swelled against her inner thigh. Her gaze drifted downward to his mouth, and an impish desire to break through that restrained manner of his swept through her.

She didn't think. She simply acted on the impulse of the moment and bent her head to brush her lips across his in a tentative kiss. She'd only meant it to be a quick touch, but the taste of fresh mint made her mouth linger against his. His body went rigid beneath her.

Desire coiled through her belly and spread its heat through her limbs. His arousal pressed harder into her leg and she shifted her hips until his erection was pressing into the apex of her thighs. His mouth moved against hers, and she nipped at his lower lip with her teeth. *Deus*, even without trying the man had her so turned on she was ready to have his baby.

Pain sliced through her, and she stiffened against him. He was right, she was reckless. First she'd hit a Sicari Lord, and now she was attempting to seduce him. Embarrassment slid its painful net around her as she broke the kiss and lifted her head. The world suddenly shifted and Dante rolled her over until he was the one on top.

His expression was harsh as he stared down at her. If she hadn't been so humiliated by her seduction attempt, she might have thought him embarrassed as well. She swallowed hard at the way he quickly got to his feet and stepped back from her. The stiff way he moved gave her the impression that he felt soiled being so close to her.

Not that it would surprise her. There were a lot of Sicari men who'd found her lack of abilities unattractive. Except Michael. He'd not cared until the day she'd lost the baby and her ability to have children. Then he'd simply walked away without looking back. She scrambled to her feet. Head bowed, she breathed in a sharp breath.

"I'm sorry, *il mio signore*, you were right. I'm reckless and deserve whatever sentence you hand out."

Humiliation held her rigid in front of him, and she jumped as he uttered a violent oath beneath his breath. Her gaze jerked upward. Desire, anger, and confusion hardened his expression into an icy façade as he turned away from her.

"It's not your fighting skills I'm concerned about," he ground out.

"I don't understand." Puzzled, she shook her head in bemusement.

"It's *who* you are that's the problem."

Praise for the Order of the Sicari novels

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An award-winning author of erotic romance, Monica Burns penned her first short romance story at the age of nine. A workaholic wife and mother, Monica believes it's possible for the good guy to win if they work hard enough.

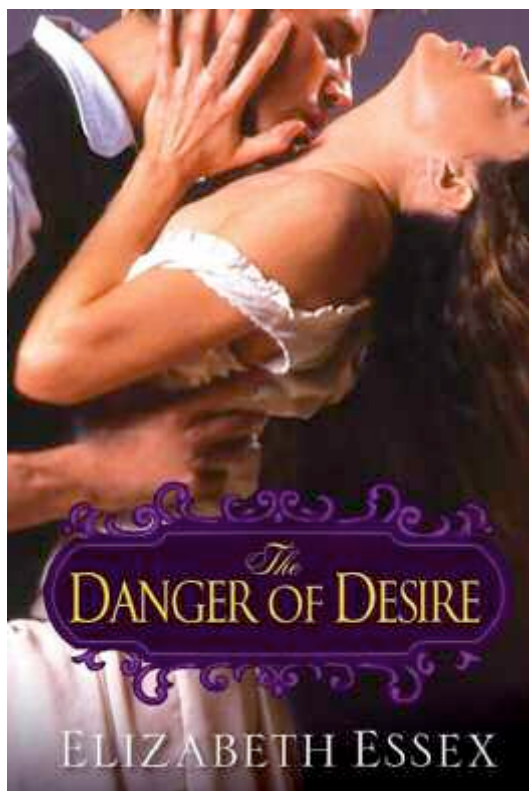
THE DANGER OF DESIRE ~ ELIZABETH ESSEX

Set a Thief

Meggs is a prime filching mort, a pickpocket at the top of her game, but she can't outrun the noose forever. Desperate to escape the grind of petty larceny and regain the life she has lost, she will do anything, and risk everything on one reckless bid for freedom.

To Catch a Thief

The slums of London are a world away from the codes of honor and bravery that define the Royal Navy, but the agile pickpocket with the shapely ankles is exactly what Captain Hugh McAlden needs to stem the treasonous leak of information from the very heart of the Admiralty. To find his traitor, McAlden will have to trust in honor amongst thieves, but he can't stop Meggs from igniting his passions and stealing his heart.



*London, England
November, 1799*

Lord, but it was cold and raw as a St. Giles curse. Nothing kept out the aching damp. Meggs hugged her arms closer to her sides, tucked her bare fingers up in fists and quickened her pace along the deserted sidewalk, as she and her brother slipped their way through St. James's dripping streets towards the Strand, looking for a few more likely culls. But drunken lords had been thin on the ground this morning. The icy drizzle had been falling in fits and starts since dawn, and the sky remained an ominous, bone cold gray.

She hated it. Hated it all - the insidious cold, the incessant rain, the petty larceny - but hunger had a way of sorting out priorities. There was thievery to be done.

"Tell me again." At her side, Timmy swiped at his cold nose with the back of his sleeve.

For her brother, Meggs pushed the bleak feeling of unease aside.

"We'll be rich, we will. And we'll live in a lovely house, a stout cottage, you and me, my lucky Tanner, just the two of us. Someplace warm, like Dorset."

She had no idea if Dorset really were a warm place. Perhaps she had heard it said once, or perhaps she had been told palm trees grew there. And even she knew palm trees only grew in warm places. But wherever it was they went, she was determined it be warm. They had been cold for far too long.

And today, when London's creeping, yellow fog was thick with ice, she felt as though it would be winter forever. Days like this, she despaired of ever being dry and warm again. Or full. Her stomach growled in empty resentment.

And so, in the face of such barren grayness, she lied. "We'll have a house with lots of fireplaces, with warm cozy fires, all snug and toasty. And in the summer, a rose garden so the air will always smell nice, not like coal. We'll have a big garden with an orchard at one end with apples and pears for you to eat whenever you like, and trees for you to climb. And a tree with a rope swing for you to play on."

Her brother was too young to remember what it had been like before. He'd been barely four years old when they'd been packed off to London. And eight years under old Nan's deft tutelage couldn't help but leave its mark.

"When?" he asked with the cynical straightforwardness of a child who was well used to hearing Banbury tales.

"Soon, I think. We need one more this morning. One good one." It was always the hardest - that last purse of the morning. After nearly four hours she and Timmy were getting tired, but the toffs were waking up. So much easier to dip them when they were still half-muzzied with drink. "So look sharp, my little Tanner. You clap your peepers on a likely greenhead and we'll get a meat pie, after."

"Each?"

She hated that hopeful tone. The one she always had to disappoint. "To split. But only if we spy a likely toff to tip. So look sharp. Mind the traps." The last thing they needed was to run afoul of the Constabulary, who were always about in this part of town, protecting the deserving rich from the undeserving poor, the criminal element. From thieves like them.

Her eyes never stopped combing the pavement, even as her mouth spun fantasy out of the chill air. "There. That one. He'll do us a treat."

The toff limping out of Spring Gardens onto Cockspur Street was just the sort she liked, if she couldn't have a drunk. Big man, but

tired, he was, weariness stewing from his bones along with the cold steam of his breath in the frigid, snowy air. And he was a gimp - heavily favoring his left leg - but without a cane or walking stick. There was a bloody piece of luck. It paid to stay well clear of walking sticks. But he was a gentleman, all right, with a well enough set of togs, though he looked none too comfortable in them. Too new. Country man recently come up to town, was her guess.

Meggs hitched the basket of sewing higher onto her hip, tipped Timmy the wink and headed along the pavement in the man's direction.

She kept her eyes on the mark. On his hands and his face. Definitely a country man, though he was younger than she had first thought. Pain and injury did that to a man - aged him. His face, as he looked up and down Cockspur Street for his direction, was weathered and rugged like the granite hills of Derbyshire. A walking tor, that's what he was.

There it was again, that same strange pang of dread, that feeling that was half memory and half longing for something just out of reach. She tried to mentally push the nebulous sensation away, but it was like swatting at a cobweb - invisible, tenuous bits of feeling clung stubbornly to her brain.

But there was no room for mooning about. She needed to keep her wits about her head and concentrate on the flat ahead. On the gleaming watch he'd just pulled from his pocket to consult the time.

And then, he looked up and Meggs saw his eyes. So pale a blue, they were shocking in a face so tan. Chips of ice held greater warmth, and yet there was a fire, a force that sparked so strongly, so powerfully within the frozen wasteland of his gaze, she had to turn away for fear of being singed.

She knew that look. A zealot. Moon-eyed. Dicked in the nob. Whatever it was, every instinct she possessed screamed danger. And clever girl that she was, she minded quick-like, keeping her head down and scurrying across the street to stay well clear of his path, away from all that steely awareness. She had no desire to receive another blast from the furnace that was his eyes, thank you very much.

But that was a mistake, too.

For while she was minding the dangerous, sharp-eyed cove, she smashed headlong into another body and down they went, for real.

It was generally not the sagest of ideas to frisk a toff without having ever clapped peepers on him to see if he were a likely chum, but her clever fingers were already making professional-like, cataloging

his portable chattels before she could have a look-see and come to a prudent decision.

Merino wool, good quality. Waistcoat, brocade silk. Belly of considerable girth. Scent of expensive cigars and brandy. Toff. Watch, fob and purse, quick and easy as you please as she fell down, and the top button of her loosely pinned bodice obligingly popped open to fill his eyes with the sight and feel of her padded, upthrust breasts as they brushed against him. And to finish the business, a spill of white petticoat and a breathless, helpless display of calf.

It was all as familiar as a Drury Lane play, and twice as well-rehearsed.

"Lawks," she cawed on top of him, "me basket!" She snatched at the fallen bits of fabric and sewing, an embroidered bodice piece having fallen, quite by design, in the gentleman's considerable lap. Her fingers brushed mercifully fleetingly across his cods, so his blood would keep well away from his brain.

It was just as old Nan always said - a man couldn't think and fill his rod at the same time. Keep him doing the one, and he'd never be able to do the other.

And it was done. She was up and fussing with her basket and moving away muttering, "Don't care who they knock over. Missus'll have my head, if- Ere, gimme that!" she called as Timmy darted by, pretending to grab at the lacy underthings she carried in her basket.

"Here now! Leave off there!" a man's voice intruded.

Meggs turned back, thinking for some un-Godly reason of the pale-eyed man. But no, it was worse - a constable. How had she missed seeing him? Cripes, that was all they needed - the Law barging his way towards her, waving his cosh at Timmy.

But Timmy scarpered right quick, the heavy purse she passed him already surreptitiously down his shirt. "I saw her bottom, I saw her bottom!" he yelled gleefully as he went running through the foot traffic.

Meggs stepped into the Trap's line of sight to divert his attention. "Oh, Constable! Thank you."

"You all right, Miss?" he asked.

The constable was young, and thankfully, someone she had never crossed before. Meggs let her real fear and apprehension color her voice. "Brazen it out," old Nan would have said, "but make it real, dearie."

"Right enough, no thanks to him. Knocked me off my feet, he did." She cut her eyes towards the fat toff still righting himself and fanned her hand demurely across her half-revealed décolleté. Lovely

word that, one of Nan's favorites. "Have to be rich to have décolleté," she used to say, "the poor just have titties." Rich or poor, the young constable's gaze had dropped six inches to what one hand revealed, while under the basket, her other hand concealed the liberated watch deep within the folds of her skirts.

It was a risk to draw such attention to herself, but she needed to make sure Timmy was clean away, and with the constable's eyes glued to her bumped up titties, she'd earned herself some running room. Speaking of which.

"Lawks, the time! My Missus'll have my head. Much obliged, Constable." And she was off, muttering and fussing, turning from the pavement and heading into the sea of people moving through Charing Cross.

And then she felt it - the icy blast from the Devil's own furnace scalding the back of her neck. Meggs turned to find the eyes of the pale-eyed devil slicing into her like cold, sharp steel. And even as he eyed her, the corner of his mouth hitched up with a detached amusement that told her he saw right through her, as easily as if she were a pane of a shop glass window.

That was when she abandoned all play acting and ran like hell was opening up behind her. This time, she kept her eyes wide open.

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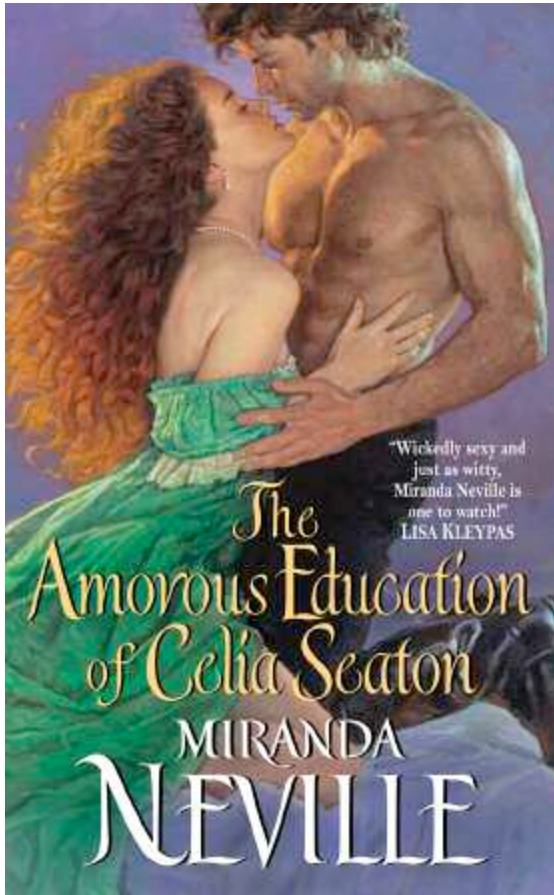


Kensington Brava. ISBN: 978-0758251589
December 1, 2011. © 2011 by Elizabeth Essex
www.elizabthesessex.com

When not re-reading Jane Austen, mucking about in her garden, or simply messing about with boats, Elizabeth Essex can be found at her computer, making up stories about people who lead far more interesting lives than she. It wasn't always so. Elizabeth graduated from Hollins College, and then earned her MA from Texas A&M University in Nautical Archaeology. While she loved the life of an underwater archaeologist, she has found her true calling writing historical romance full of passion, daring and adventure.

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

**THE AMOROUS EDUCATION
OF CELIA SEATON
MIRANDA NEVILLE**



Book Three of the Burgundy Club series

The story of Tarquin Compton, London's most feared dandy, and Celia Seaton, a governess whose life he ruined with one careless quip. Find out what happens when they meet by chance in the middle of nowhere ...

Celia and Tarquin are lost on the moors. Between them they possess very few clothes, one memory, and a novel of doubtful literary quality.

Looking for something to divert her thoughts, she remembered the novel. What could be better than to curl up on the ground under her blanket and follow the adventures of Francis Featherbrain, which must surely be about to improve after a slow start.

He goes for a walk. Yawn. He meets the vicar's wife. He walks and talks with the vicar's wife. Even Celia's life hadn't been this dull. Surely something would happen soon.

The vicar's wife wears scarlet fringed petticoats. Now that was unusual.

Oh my goodness! And scarlet silk garters! Celia's eyes popped as she read the consequence of this discovery: "I put both my legs between hers..."

Celia's knowledge of mistresses wasn't confined to the forbidden gossip of well-brought up English virgins. The nature of her upbringing had made her informed about relations between a man and a woman, yet she couldn't help being fascinated by the details. She felt a thrill of recognition at reading about the lady's "coral bud of sensuality." It came as a disappointment to discover that the youthful protagonist merely dreamed the encounter. She began the next chapter eager to discover if young Mr. Featherbrain managed to "swive" outside of his imagination.

Peter Aretin, whom she assumed was the author, was no master of English prose. As she read about Francis' enrollment at Eton, his lodgings, and his study of the Latin classics, she quickly became bored and skipped to where he became interested in his landlord's daughter and a maidservant. To the former he promises marriage.

Don't believe him! She wanted to shriek. He may swear eternal love but he has been spying on you while you undress. There's only one thing he wants from you. She was right, of course. Over the poor girl's protestations he sat her on the edge of a table and ...oh dear! Amazingly she ended up enjoying it. *Her critical period arrived sooner than I expected. A tremulation possessed her whole frame—her eye-balls rolled as if convulsed, and her eye-lids quivered, shook, opened and shut...*

Celia tossed aside the book in disgust. The villain had seduced the unfortunate girl with promises that must surely be false. Featherbrain was a gentleman and never going to marry the daughter of a tradesman. And then, when the girl had very sensibly resis-

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

ted his blandishments, he'd taken her against her will. To Celia's mind the encounter was very close to ravishment, despite the girl's eventual pleasure.

How could Tarquin possess such a dreadful book? Was it really his?

Of course it was, hence his peculiar demeanor when he'd found her reading it before. He'd known exactly what it was. She ought to get rid of it, bury it in the ground perhaps. And yet ... it intrigued her, despite, or perhaps because of the crude unfamiliar vocabulary and exact descriptions of private acts.

One thing was certain. She couldn't let Tarquin know she'd been reading the book. Her face burned. Having buried it in the bottom of the sack, under the food, she walked the short distance to the brook. A little cold water on her glowing cheeks wouldn't go amiss.

It felt good on her feet too, sore from two days walking barefoot. She left her blanket skirt on the bank and wore only her shift, now a little grimy. She'd like to rinse it but recoiled from being left with only the blanket for coverage.

The shallow water ran swift, throwing up spray as it divided about the larger rocks in the streambed. She amused herself hopping from stone to stone, tickling her toes in the foam. Rounding a gentle curve that had been concealed by a stand of bushes, she stopped dead.

She'd had occasion to admire Tarquin's bare chest. Nothing had prepared her for the sight of the whole man in his naked perfection, standing in midstream. Breathless she watched the contours of thighs and buttocks clench as he bent to scoop water between his palms. Then the muscles of his shoulders and back came into play as he raised one arm and splashed water down its length, rubbing the armpit and shoulder with circular motions of the other hand. He repeated the motion on the opposite side and her throat went dry.

Her feet clung to a damp boulder but she couldn't retain her balance and she teetered, arms flailing. She tried to do it quietly and managed to remain upright, but made the tiniest splash as one foot landed in water. He turned to face her.

Hastily he lowered his hands over his groin but not before she was able to confirm, with some surprise, that Joe had been correct. Tarquin Compton, though unusually tall, had a tiddly little pillock. Not that she had any basis for comparison, but based on her recent

reading she would have expected it to be larger. Stammering and blushing she took to her heels, floundering back upstream and out of sight and giving him, she feared, a good view at her retreating bottom.

*

He already knew Celia had beautiful legs and when she'd removed his boots he'd seen her shapely behind. It looked even better bare, firm cheeks revealed by the movements of her shift as she ran away. He wanted to call her back.

When Joe had insulted his manhood he hadn't been bothered since he knew it wasn't true. This was an item of personal knowledge that apparently survived memory loss. Besides he'd checked at the first opportunity.

But being caught shriveled by a cold water bath, he wanted to assure Celia it wasn't always like this. Especially when the sight of her had him rapidly regaining length and girth. He repressed the urge to chase her, absurd since an innocent like Celia wouldn't even understand the significance of what she'd seen. Surely she wouldn't. She'd have no reason to think ill of him.

He needed to face a fact that had become obvious since the kiss in the hayloft, a kiss that might have led to something more had they not been interrupted: he desired her.

As well as washing himself, he'd rinsed out his fine knitted drawers, a task he performed with no sense of familiarity whatsoever. However he loathed the feeling of soiled linen and hoped the garment would dry over night. He spread it over a bush and pulled his calf-length pantaloons over his bare arse.

He found her seated under a tree, those long legs folded primly and covered. But something had changed. She no longer looked like a prim governess, nor an ungainly girl. Under the worst of circumstances, clad in a grubby chemise and a blanket, uncombed hair rioting over her shoulders, she looked like a siren, made to lure him to his doom.

Taking a deep breath, he wrestled for control. To take advantage of her under these circumstances would be highly dishonorable. He was certain she had no notion of the effect she had on him. He sat down near her, one leg folded beneath him, the other bent against his chest.

"That was a rather awkward encounter," he said, hoping his voice projected tranquility and reassurance.

"It's all right," she said in a small voice. Her gaze darted back

and forth between his limbs and the ground. Naturally she was embarrassed. It was up to him, as the man, to take the lead and put her at ease.

"We find ourselves in an unusual position. Traveling together like this has thrown us into an intimacy which isn't normal or proper for an unmarried couple," he said, seeking the right note: sensible, cool, restrained. She nodded, her eyes now fixed on a spot next to her knee.

"I'm sure in the past we were always chaperoned, or at least there were other people nearby. A kiss under those circumstances can't go too far. You probably don't understand what I'm talking about, but we must be careful we don't let nature take its course." He feared he sounded like a pompous idiot. Better that than a blackguard.

"We never kissed."

That took him aback. "Never?"

"No," she said. "You always treated me with the greatest respect."

Instead of relief he felt an irrational indignation. "I do not believe it shows any lack of respect to kiss the woman one is to marry. The woman one purports to love." He frowned. "It sounds to me like I was—am—a prig."

She looked up and her gray eyes were huge and bright. "I wanted you to kiss me," she said.

An invitation he ought to resist. Just one kiss, he reasoned. To refuse would be to insult a lady.

Leaning over he put one hand to her chin. Her wide, plump mouth opened. Kissing, like all lovemaking, improved with familiarity and practice. Last time he hadn't known what to expect. Now he knew her to be both inexperienced and willing. So he took her mouth gently and firmly and was stunned by his own reaction at her eager response to his invasion.

"I'll give you a thousand kisses," he croaked just before he completely lost his senses and toppled her to the ground.

Any notion of gentlemanly restraint faded. Somehow they stretched out on the straggly grass, mouths devouring, bodies straining against each other. He cupped a breast, firm beneath his hand and he felt his erection swell as his thighs straddled her hip. Pushing aside the linen shift, questing fingers found plump peachy skin and a taut nipple. She gasped at the touch and thrust her chest forward begging for his caress. He obliged her by taking first one

~ THE AMOROUS EDUCATION OF CELIA SEATON ~ MIRANDA NEVILLE ~

nipple and then the other in his mouth and sucking hard, eliciting further pleased moans. Her hands cradled his head and tugged it back to her lips. "Kiss me again," she said greedily.

"A thousand kisses," he repeated, "and then a hundred more," and recognized the origin of the sentiment. The fact that a student of the church knew the erotic poetry of Catullus was a reflection that could only distract him for an instant. His brain emptied of anything but Celia's kisses, her soft strong flesh under his hands, his raging desire to possess her, and her keen response to his attentions.

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Praise for The Burgundy Club Novels

"..The Wild Marquis has it all, murder, mayhem, passion, lots of sexual tension, a to die for hero, and a truly deserving heroine. I can't wait to see what else this author brings us"

— *Rakehell.com*

"Here's plenty of angst and misunderstandings plus some fairly torrid love scenes en route to a very satisfying happy ending. The characters are sharply delineated, and they come across as real three-dimensional personalities ... I was charmed, charmed, charmed ... Grab **The Dangerous Viscount** immediately – you won't be disappointed!"

— *The Season for Romance (Top Pick)*

"Miranda Neville is quickly moving up into the auto-buy author category for me. Her plots are well thought out and cleverly delivered, being both intriguing and unique. Her characters are intelligent, interesting and very well-rounded., with heroines that aren't wimpy or whinny nor are they overly perfect" "

— *Night Owl Reviews (Top Pick)*



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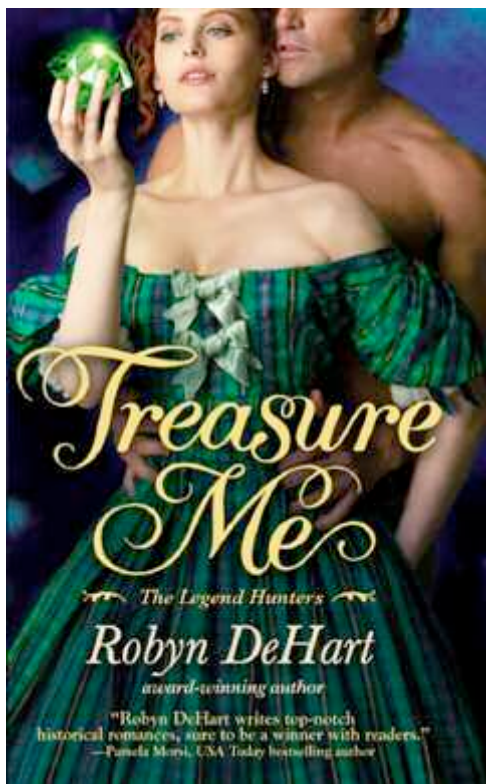
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The Amorous Education of Celia Seaton is Miranda Neville's fourth historical romance. Earlier books in the Burgundy Club series are *The Wild Marquis* and *The Dangerous Viscount*.

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

TREASURE ME~ ROBYN DEHART



A dashing legend hunter, a stunning scholarly miss and the treasure that could decide the fate of England. As their desire grows, so too does the danger. Now they'll have to risk everything to keep the jewels out of a murder's hands.

Graeme climbed the hillside to the castle ruins. If his cousin, Niall, was searching for the legendary Loch Ness treasure, then more than likely he was doing so within the caverns that wove beneath Castle Urquhart.

Much of the castle's outer walls remained intact, but the structure itself was composed of mostly crumbled down walls with one

partially standing tower. The entrance to the caves lay deep within the belly of the ruins.

He climbed over a collapsed wall, then skirted beneath what remained of an archway. Despite the ruins, it still looked very much a fortress guarding over the loch. Graeme stepped inside one of the few remaining rooms of the castle that still claimed four walls and made his way down the stone staircase.

Quickly, yet quietly, he moved, trying to make good time before his wife woke up and realized he'd deserted her - and to prevent Niall from discovering him.

Graeme hit the bottom of the staircase and then started down the tunnel to his left. The further he walked, the narrower the passage became until he found himself standing amidst cavern walls. Gone were the man-made bricks and in their place, were the slick, moss-covered sides of a cave. Graeme's lungs chilled as he took a deep breath, the air heavy with the scent of his stale, cold, and chalk-like surroundings.

He moved further into the darkness. There was a slight thump from somewhere behind him, then several rocks broke off the wall and crumbled to the ground. Someone was following him. Graeme stopped walking, molded himself to the damp cavern wall, and listened. Definitive steps moved through the tunnel behind him.

Perhaps his cousin's partner? Graeme started moving forward again, trying to gain some ground on the intruder. The deeper into the cave he walked, the colder the air became. A draft shuddered around him, and the torches nearest him extinguished, leaving him in darkness. Again he molded himself against the cavern wall and waited. The footsteps grew closer.

Graeme inhaled slowly. Soft footfalls beat against the ground of the tunnel as the intruder approached. A breeze fluttered against him when the person passed in front of his hiding place. Graeme reached out, grabbed them, and then slammed their body against the cavern wall.

Upon impact, the person released a groan that was decidedly more feminine than Graeme was anticipating. And the arms beneath his hands felt far too soft and small to be a man's.

"That hurt," she said.

"Vanessa!" he said. "What the devil are you doing following me?"

"You left early, and you were so careful, so quiet. I deduced you were attempting to conceal something from me." Then she was quiet for a moment before continuing, and he wished he could see

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

her. "It is my wifely duty to investigate such matters. That is until I am no longer your wife."

He exhaled loudly, and the sound echoed around them.

"Precisely where are you going in the dark?" she asked. "I brought along some candles, in my bag, for precisely this purpose. Shall I light one?"

"No, you shall not."

"Are you going to release me?"

He hadn't let her go yet. He was enjoying the feel of her womanly curves pressed against his own body. He had her pinned to the wall and that was precisely what he wanted for the moment. He dipped his head so that his breath brushed against her shoulder. "Perhaps I had other things in mind."

She shivered beneath his hands. Her breath caught making her words husky. "I'm not certain that would be a prudent activity in such a place."

"Probably not." But it didn't mean that he couldn't kiss her. Just one sweet taste. He caught her lips and kissed her hard. She whimpered against his mouth, as her body relaxed against his. More than anything, he wanted to take her back to the house and properly bed her. But he couldn't afford to ignore his duty to Solomon's. He'd made a commitment to them, and he couldn't ignore it. He'd be damned if he'd be the man his father was.

Vanessa was prim, yet not so proper, and it was a heady combination. Damnation if he couldn't forget his own name while touching this woman. But there was work to be done. He pulled back from her.

"Be careful, follow behind me. And don't talk," Graeme said. He grabbed her hand and pulled her in the direction that he'd been headed. He could attempt to send her back to the house, but he knew that would be wasted words and effort. She was not the sort of woman who would behave or do as she was told.

In fact, she seemed far more likely to do the exact opposite of what she'd been told. It seemed increasingly unlikely that he'd be able to send her to London unless he'd be willing to escort her there himself or tie her to the train. Neither of which guaranteed she wouldn't follow him right back here.

They crept along in the darkness, and Vanessa neither stumbled nor said a word. He tried not to be impressed that she could match his stealth and keep his pace. But that probably explained the smile that he knew played at his lips.

Somewhere to the right, Graeme heard a rock scrape down the

stone wall. He stopped moving, and she halted along with him. Up ahead, he could see a slight flicker of light. Perhaps the torches there remained lit.

"It's coming from over there," Vanessa whispered, and he knew she probably pointed as well, but the tunnel was too dark to make out her precise position.

"Quiet," he whispered into her ear. She smelled good, like springtime and clean linens, and he wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her until her scent enveloped him. He stepped away to clear his head, then moved them in the direction of the noise.

The light grew brighter as they stepped forward, and Graeme knew they'd reach Niall soon. He just hoped there would be enough darkness to conceal them.

Another bang of something, then Niall swore. Graeme found a wall to the right that they could hide behind. He moved Vanessa in that direction.

"You stay behind here," he told her.

She nodded, her eyes wide.

Graeme looked around the corner and saw Niall moving rocks as if to build a barricade. Over and over he bent, then rose to stack them until he'd walled off a section. What the hell was he up to? If he was searching for the treasure, why would he build a wall?

Graeme wasn't certain how long they waited, finally Graeme moved over to the wall and peeked around it, but Niall was gone. They stepped around and entered the area where Niall had been working. Directly above them, the ceiling towered high, covered with long reaching stalactites. Then the chamber narrowed, rounding downward to form a tunnel. Damn it all, but Niall had already escaped.

"Son of a bitch," Graeme bit out. "He's gone."

"If you wanted to know what he was doing, why would you not simply ask him?" Vanessa asked.

There was a simple logic to her question, and for a moment, Graeme wondered if that tactic would work. But he didn't know if Niall trusted him enough to answer truthfully. Chances were he would not. Were their positions traded, it was unlikely that he would trust Niall. But if the men of Solomon's were suspicious, then they had good reason to be. They were cautious men, and by no means alarmist.

"It seems such a simple tactic is not possible."

She shrugged. "Asking questions has always been preferable to

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

me, than to wonder endlessly what one is thinking or doing." She looked around them, her nose wrinkled. "What is he building?"

"I don't know. I need to look around," he said, expecting at any moment that she would begin complaining about the temperature or the darkness or simply the fact that they were in a cave. But Vanessa seemed as at home here as he did. She nodded, then turned to investigate the stonewall Niall had constructed.

Graeme moved to the opposite side of the wall. Stone-by-stone, Niall had stacked this to the cavern ceiling. There appeared to be no significant reason. But that was unlikely. Graeme turned and looked back up at the high ceiling. Those long, narrow and nearly flesh-colored stalactites pointed down at him. Accusatory fingers ready to blame him for failure. Echoes of his father's voice whispered inside him. But Graeme wouldn't give up so quickly.

Graeme turned in the direction of the wall just in time to watch Vanessa take a step around it, and then there was a huge blast. Dust exploded around them, and rocks tumbled to the ground.

A stalactite dropped, knocking Graeme to the ground. He tried to move and realized that it had speared through his arm, pinning him to the floor. Blinding pain surged through him, and he growled in response.

As the dirt cleared, Graeme saw that the explosion had split open the floor of the cave, creating a huge gash separating him from Vanessa.

She came to her feet and brushed the dirt off her skirts. She looked around her. She came to the edge, and dirt continued to fall into the hole below.

"Don't move," Graeme warned, holding up his free arm. "That ground is still unstable."

She took several steps backward. "It's too wide," she said calmly. "I don't think I could cross it."

"No, it's far too wide. I couldn't even cross it," he said.

It was then that she seemed to look up and realize where he was. Her eyes widened—and she pointed. "Graeme, your arm. Are you bleeding?"

"A little. It's barely engaged my skin." Not completely untrue, though he would lose more blood when he pulled the damn thing out. While the stalactite was not that large in circumference, it was brutally sharp and had it fallen a few inches over, it would have gone straight through his heart.

He gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and pulled up with all his strength. It tore through his flesh on the way out, and he knew that

echoing sound filling the cavern came from his throat. But finally he was free. Blood oozed from the wound, running down his arm. He struggled to sit up, the pain swirling nausea through his stomach.

"You need to staunch the bleeding," Vanessa said. "Create a tourniquet."

He nodded, knowing what she said was true. He was thankful she said it aloud to remind his clouded mind what to do. He ripped his other sleeve off and wrapped it around his arm, then used his teeth to help tie it off. The fabric strained as he pulled it tight, and the blood slowed to a trickle before eventually stopping.

Graeme didn't move for several moments, merely concentrated on inhaling and exhaling. Breathe in, breathe out.

"I don't think you're in any state to rescue me," she said.

"You just sit still and don't touch anything." He glanced around them, surveying their surroundings once more. Several other stalactites had also fallen, and the instability of the blast could cause additional structural damage. "I don't want to cause any more shifts or else we'll never get out of here."

She nodded, but continued to look around her.

"I'm serious, Vanessa, don't move. The caves here go down so deep, if you fall down there," he pointed at the gap between them, then shook his head. "I'd never be able to save you. But I think I can circle around and find another tunnel that leads to you."

She took a steadying breath. "I'll be safe. You just work on a way of getting me out of here. And concentrate on not bleeding to death."

"I'm working on that right now."

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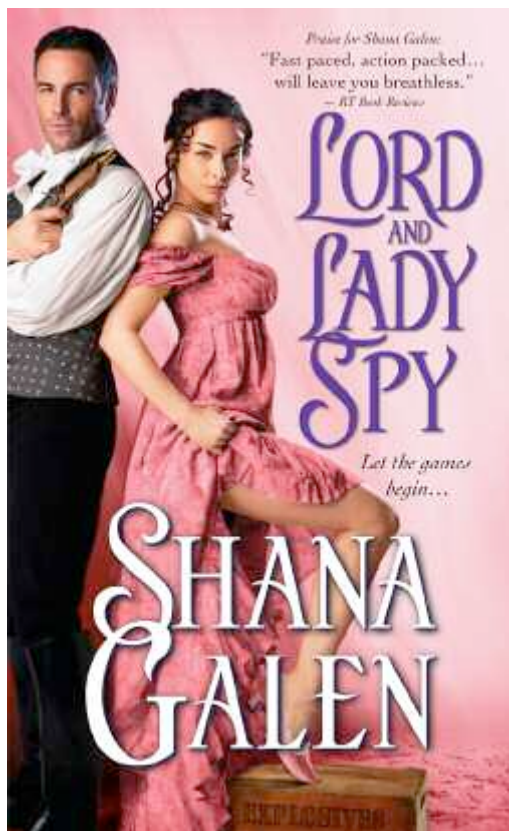
www.RobynDeHart.com

Award-winning author Robyn DeHart has always loved stories and adventure, so it was either become a stuntwoman for the movies or live out those adventures from the safety of her PJ's and computer. A fear of heights and spiders insisted she choose the latter and she couldn't be happier for doing so.

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

LORD AND LADY SPY

SHANA GALEN



Lady Sophia Smythe, London's preeminent spy, is unemployed. When she's offered the chance to solve a murder and regain her position, she agrees. There's one problem. Her husband. Lord Adrian Smythe isn't the dull, predictable gentleman she thought. He's a rival secret agent. Two spies, one position. All's fair in love and war.

~ LORD AND LADY SPY ~ SHANA GALEN ~

Lord and Lady Smythe have been married for five years. Five long, boring years. But when they discover each other's hidden identity as England's preeminent spies, their passion is rekindled. There's one problem. Sophia and Adrian are unemployed spies, rivals for the last opening in the elite Barbican group. The agent who solves the murder of the prime minister's brother wins the position. But these two can't work together and don't trust one another enough to let the other out of sight. Find out what happens when they're attacked by three armed men.

Why on earth are you walking so quickly?" He looked over his shoulder. "Because I don't want them to catch up to us."

Sophia knew who he referred to—the three men who'd been loitering on the street when she'd arrived. She glanced over her shoulder. The three thugs were gaining on them. She'd been so lost in thought, she hadn't been paying attention and hadn't noted—until Adrian pointed it out—they were being followed.

So that was two mistakes in one day. She couldn't afford a third. In Paris, it had been the third mistake that cost her.

She reached into her reticule and withdrew a small, slim dagger. "You take the one on the left." She nodded to a dark-haired youth in a faded blue coat. "I'll take the blond and the short one." The three were probably after money. She didn't think this would take long.

"I don't think so." Adrian was pulling her arm. "If we hurry—"

"If we hurry, we'll enter that alley even quicker. That's what they want. We stand a better chance on this street where we can maneuver." All of her instincts told her to stand and fight.

"Bloody hell."

She didn't know if he swore because she was right or because the men were too close for escape now.

"You're not taking two of them," he said, pulling a knife from his boot. "I'll take Blue Coat and Blondie. You take Shorty."

Now was not the time to argue. She'd dispatch Shorty easily and then help Adrian with the others. As one, they turned to face their attackers.

"Hey little lady," Blue Coat called in a sing-song voice. "What are you doing so far from home?"

Sophia offered a smile. "I was hoping to meet the three of you." She held up her dagger, pricked her thumb with it absently. "It's been ever so long since I've had to clean the blood off this little blade." She looked at Adrian.

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

"Two days, at least," he drawled.

She gave him a genuine smile. He *did* have a sense of humor! Shorty held up his fist. "I got something for you, gov."

"Oh, that's no good," Sophia said. The men were closing in now. She could see their strategy. They thought to surround her and Adrian. "We already divvied you up. You, Shorty, are mine."

Shorty laughed with surprise. "You hear that, Will? She said I get to have her first." And he lunged for her with one dirty hand. Sophia flicked her wrist and slashed his hand, opening a line of bright red.

"Bitch!" Shorty screamed, cradling his hand. "She cut me!"

His companions jumped to his aide, but Adrian stepped in front of her, pinning her back to a wall. Frustrated, Sophia tried to scoot around Adrian, while he aimed one kick at Blue Coat and punched Blondie in the chin. "Grab him and hold him," Blondie yelled in a hoarse voice.

Shorty grabbed one arm and Adrian wrestled to keep the other free from Blue Coat. He was losing ground, though, because he was trying to shield her.

"I don't need your protection," she said, attempting to duck under his arm. "Move out of the way, so I can hit my target."

But Adrian ignored her, swiping at Blue Coat with his knife while blocking her attempts to engage Shorty. "Run, Sophia. I can handle this."

Ridiculous man. But he didn't give up ground. She dodged right, and he blocked her. She screamed in frustration just as Blondie landed a blow to Adrian's jaw. "*You run, my lord. I can handle this.*"

Didn't he remember their meeting in the East End? She'd more than held her own. But he still didn't trust her abilities. She'd have to prove to him, again, she could handle a fight.

Finally she saw an opening, skirted past Adrian, and stepped in front of Shorty. In surprise, he released Adrian's arm. She hoped Adrian could hold his own against the other two and used her dagger to force Shorty into retreat. Now she was far enough from Adrian to keep him from interfering and to give herself room to fight. Having been stuck once, Shorty was eyeing the dagger warily.

"Why don't you put that down, missy? Try to behave like a lady." He lunged at her, and she easily sidestepped.

"Because I'm not a lady, and if you don't run on home now, you're going to see exactly how unladylike I am."

She heard a muffled yelp behind her and the sound of a body slamming into the ground. Shorty gaped at whatever he saw, and she took her opportunity. She swiped her leg at his feet, throwing him off balance, then used the side of her hand to smack him across the nose. Blood, watery and plentiful as the Thames, gushed out. Instinctively, he put his hand to his face, and she moved in, slipping behind him. She wrapped an arm around his neck and slid her dagger under his chin.

Immediately, he stopped squirming.

"That's right. Don't move," she murmured near his ear. He smelled like he hadn't bathed in days, but she couldn't afford ladylike sensibilities right now. She could play the delicate lady tonight—at Cordelia's dinner party.

Damn! The dinner party. They were surely going to be late now. She glanced at Adrian, able to see his progress from her new vantage point. He was doing well. Blondie was on the ground and Blue Coat was taking a beating. She could dispatch Shorty and assist Adrian, but she knew from experience operatives liked to finish what they'd started. Besides, she liked watching him work. As long as he hurried...

"Lord Smythe!" she called.

He glanced at her before turning to deflect a punch aimed for his eye. "Madam, I'm a little busy right now."

"I can see that. Do you mind hurrying a bit? We're going to be late for the dinner party. *Unfashionably* late."

He ducked to avoid Blue Coat's fist as Blondie stumbled to his feet and charged. He hit Adrian in the middle of the chest, propelling Adrian back against the wall with an "oof."

He recovered quickly, his boot landing in Blondie's abdomen, sending the man sprawling again. The move bought him a moment before Blue Coat charged. Adrian ducked under Blue Coat's arm and sidled behind him. Sophia, with her knife still at Shorty's throat, nodded her approval. He was good. Perhaps she could have run home. She might have had a chance at being ready on time...

"As much as I hate to inconvenience my sister-in-law..." Adrian panted, shoving Blue Coat against the wall of the building adjoining Hardwicke's offices, grabbing Blue Coat's hair, and smashing his face into the brick. "I'm occupied at the moment."

"Would you like my help?" she offered sweetly, digging her dagger in and drawing blood when Shorty tried to elbow her. Damn. The blood from his broken nose had seeped onto the

sleeve of her spencer. It was ruined now.

"No."

Adrian made to smash Blue Coat's face into the wall again, but Blondie jumped on him.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Sophia moaned to no one in particular. "This is going to take all evening."

She shoved Shorty against the brick wall, dug her knee into his back, and with a tug, pulled his shirtsleeves over his hands. She tied them off, yanking Shorty's hands tightly behind his back, and knotting the material. Then she pushed him onto the ground and put her heel on the back of his neck.

"Don't kill me," he begged. "I was only hoping for a few shillings to buy something to eat."

She snorted. "You were going to rape me, kill him, rob us, and buy gin. Not very nice." She ground her foot.

"Plenty of mystery, intrigue, passionate romance, and a knack for bringing the historical setting to life." —Publishers Weekly

"Sorry!" he croaked.

She shook her head. They always were. "Listen, Shorty," she said, "If you so much as lift your face out of the dirt, I'll have to come back and slash your throat. Understood?"

He whimpered.

"You know I will do it." She applied more pressure with her foot then jumped away, picked up her skirts, and joined Adrian's fight. She pulled Blondie off his back, and when he looked over his shoulder in surprise, she punched him in the nose.

Holding back her wince—it had been some time since she'd punched a man and had forgotten how much it hurt her hand—she kicked him between the legs and watched him crumple to the mud-packed street.

There. A quick and effective move. Adrian should have done it earlier, but men rarely resorted to damaging another man's nether regions. She supposed it was out of sympathy. Unfortunately for Blondie, she was fresh out of sympathy. Who was going to sympathize with her when Cordelia complained about how late she was all evening? Not Blondie there.

She wiped her hands on her skirts, noting the pale pink material had blood spatters on it. They were worse than usual, and she

wondered if her maid could get them out. Normally Sophia tried to keep bloodshed to a minimum.

She glanced impatiently at Adrian and smiled as he finally sent Blue Coat tumbling to the ground. The man rolled into a ball on his side. Adrian stepped forward, prepared to give the man another kick for good measure, but she put a hand on his arm. "We're late, remember?"

He blinked at her as if just remembering where he was and who she was. He glanced about him, saw Blondie clutching his balls and Shorty face down in the dirt. He stared at the man and then at her.

"I told you I could take care of myself."

He bent and caught his breath. "Thank you."

"You don't have to treat—what? What did you say?" She bent and looked into his gray eyes. He scowled at her. "Did you *thank* me?"

"Am I going to regret doing so?"

"No." She stood straight again, shook her head. Adrian had thanked her. *Agent Wolf* had *thanked* her. She looked about the dirty street, the decrepit buildings, the sniveling men and thought this was the best day of her life.

Adrian, still bent, was looking at her. "Why are you smiling?"

She leaned over, took his face between her hands, and kissed his lips. "Thank *you*." Blondie tried to grab her ankle and she shoved him back down with her foot. "Now, we really must go. Can you hail a hackney?"

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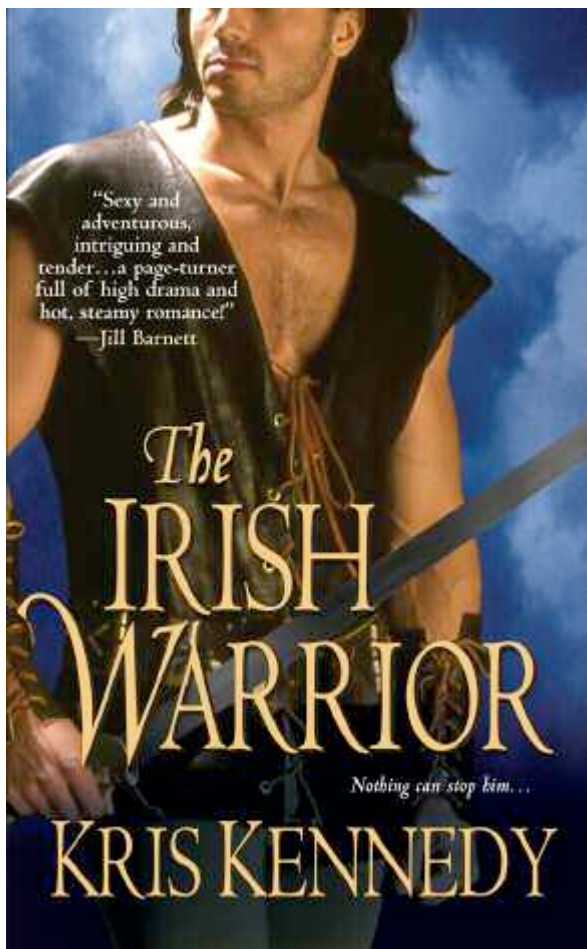
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Shana Galen is the author of adventurous Regency historical romances, including the Rita-nominated *Blackthorne's Bride*. Her books are sold worldwide and have been featured in the Rhapsody and Doubleday Book Clubs. A former English teacher, Shana now writes full time. She's a wife, a mother, and an expert multi-tasker.

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

THE IRISH WARRIOR

KRIS KENNEDY



An outlawed warrior on a dangerous mission joins forces with a desperate woman about to find out just what she's made of. Kings, outlaws, weapons and war: Can love indeed triumph over all?

**Winner of RWA® 2008 Golden Heart Award for
Best Unpublished Historical Romance**

Inhibited, accountant-minded Senna de Valery comes to Ireland to finalize a deal that will save her faltering wool business. What she gets is a cunning English lord with dangerous ulterior motives.

Forced to rely on her wits, not her ledgers, Senna frees an Irish warrior chained in the prisons, and they flee across the war-torn land of medieval Ireland, forging a partnership of passion and respect. But this roguish warrior is more than he seems, and has a formidable agenda of his own.

Finian O'Melaghlin is on a mission for his king, and nothing will stop him from his rendez-vous with a spy to prevent dangerous military secrets from falling into enemy hands. Nothing but a brave, beautiful wool merchant who is in over her head.

Neither is prepared for the powerful forces arrayed against them.

Neither can resist the fiery passion igniting between them.

They cannot imagine the sacrifices they will face, or the choices they will be forced to make.

King, outlaws, weapons and war: Can love indeed triumph over all?

They floated off, the old man watching them, until the tall grasses swallowed him up and the only thing to be seen was the blue bowl of sky overhead and the long, stretched-out wings of a dark, silent cormorant that flew overhead.

“Ye gave him coin, Senna?”

At Finian’s sharp tone, she looked down from the bird and nodded.

He snorted. “Ye bribed him. That’s something ye English like to do.”

She smiled loftily. “And something you Irish like to do is

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

assume you understand the meaning of things. 'Twasn't a bribe. And if you cannot see that, then I am at a loss for words."

He snorted again. "That'll be a rare day in hell."

"You snort a lot," she pointed out.

He stared at her a moment. "Lay down."

"Pardon?"

"An Irishman in an Irish *curragh* floating down an Irish river with some sacks of skins is unremarkable. You, remarkable. Lay down."

"How am I remarkable?" she asked, already lowering herself.

He just looked at her.

She did insist on disrobing somewhat, rather than lying in wet leather, to be baked like a cod in the sun. He grumbled but she was resolute, and in the end, he relented.

A brief, disagreeable delay ensued while she hitched and yanked at various wet clothes, disrobing down to a thin linen shift. Then she lay down in the bottom of the boat.

The sacks of skins were not down here with her, she realized irritably, although they would have made perfect bedding. But they were perched on one of the benches, sunning themselves. Finian's sword and their bows were down here with her, of course, out of sight but within easy reach. They were also poking her.

She shuffled around, trying to fit into the small cramped hull of the boat, which really was not where she wished to be, not even for a moment. She was squished, her arms tight up against her sides. It smelled. It was mucky. It was wet. Wet, as if a small pond held a secret life down in the basin of the curmudgeon's *curragh*, or whatever Finian had called it.

"Finian."

"Mmm?" He didn't look down. His powerful arms kept up a powerful paddling. She could almost feel the river skiffing away not an inch below her body.

"I think there's fish down here."

"Aye. This river has many fish."

"No. I mean this boat. Swimming around me. Little tiny fish."

His lips twitched.

"If you laugh, I'm getting up," she warned.

"Hush."

His voice went low, his lips hardly moved. Senna barely had time to feel a tingle of concern before she heard the shouts of men

at the shoreline. The rush of panic came flying for her. English men. English soldiers.

They'd been found.

"Heave to, Irishman," one of them called out.

He shoved the paddle deep into the mud of the riverbed and let the side of the boat run up against it, which halted the boat from sailing any further down the river. That would have sent the soldiers shouting for whatever others were billeted the people and patrolling the lands. It also kept the curragh from going any closer to the shore.

"That looks like O'Mallery's nubbing boat," one of them said.

"That's so," agreed Finian easily. "He let me use it."

"Not bloody likely," muttered the shorter one. They two stared at each other a moment, then the taller one snapped his fingers.

"O'Mallery don't let his wife use his pecker," he snarled. "Come over here, boy."

Senna could almost feel Finian rise up in the boat, like a huge wave uncoiling itself close to shore. She grabbed his boot. His steely gaze snapped down. With her free hand and an open palm, she mimed going softly down. *Sit down. Calm down.*

"For me," she whispered.

He fired his gaze up again. "There's only two of them," he said, not moving his lips.

"Now there's only two. You said you enjoyed traveling with me. I enjoy traveling with you, too. Let it be."

"I've let a lot of things be," he said in a calm voice. That worried her. He was still squinting towards the shoreline, locked, she supposed, in mortal eye combat with one of the English soldiers.

"I'll make it up to you," she whispered urgently.

The faintest trace of a smile lifted his lips.

"Boy, git over here."

It was the whisky that made her do it. She was fairly certain of that. The hot, uninhibiting flush the drink sent coursing through her limbs had floated into her brain and melted her wits. She took a deep breath, gave her tunic a harsh tug so it tore further, exposing an immodest curve of her breasts and the valley between. Then she sat up. Unraveled, really. Or so she hoped.

Finian's jaw dropped, but not so far as the English boys' did on the shore.

~ TASTY PRALINES ~

"Jay-sus," one of them shouted, jumping back as if she was one of the *fey*.

She smiled as lustily as she could and draped her arms over Finian's thighs, her face close to his groin, implying she'd only just lifted her mouth away.

"Hello lads," she said in a confident, husky tone. Or did it sound like she was ill? She didn't quite know how to sound seductive, and hoped this would do. "Are we disturbing ye?"

She tried to sound as much like Finian as possible, the rocking cadence of his speech, the slow, seductive dropping off of the sharp-pointed ends of words, as if he couldn't be bothered to stab so at a thought.

The soldiers gaped. Finian adapted immediately. He put his palm lightly but possessively around her back of her head, exerting the slightest pressure downward toward what was now, partially, male hardness. He was obviously familiar with the move. A firey rush shot through her womb.

The young soldiers turned their gapes to Finian, then burst out laughing, smacking each other on the arms, as if they'd accomplished something great and worthy. All pretense of being on opposing sides fell away in the face of getting a woman to suck their—.

Holding her stiff smile, Senna said through unmoving lips, "You may attack them now."

Finian didn't remove his gaze from them either. "Shall I? And yet, we like traveling together."

"Let's try this, then." She lifted her voice. "Have a good day, lads," she sang out, lifting one hand to wave. "I know we shall."

Finian yanked his paddle up and the boat began slipping downstream. One of the soldiers stepped forward, a concerned look on his face. He raised a hand, half roused from his voyeuristic stupor.

Again, it was the whisky that gave her the idea. She was quite certain this time. She bent her head and brushed her lips over Finian's groin.

The soldiers' jaws dropped, then they exploded into whoops and hollers, jumping up and down like they were standing on a beehive. Nothing about Finian changed, except that his hand tightened almost imperceptibly around the back of her head.

The river sluiced away beneath the boat, but Senna, to her own dim surprise, did not move. The bottom of the boat was

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hard and wet, with a rib bone-like wooden beam jutting into her as she knelt between Finian's legs. But she didn't feel a thing.

All she was aware of was Finian's hard thighs beneath her arms, the heat of him engulfing her chin and cheeks, the hot sun on her top of her head, and the powerful rising up of his chest. His was looking down, his face shadowed, his dark eyes unreadable but watching her.

And his hand was still on the back of her head.

She must never drink whisky again....

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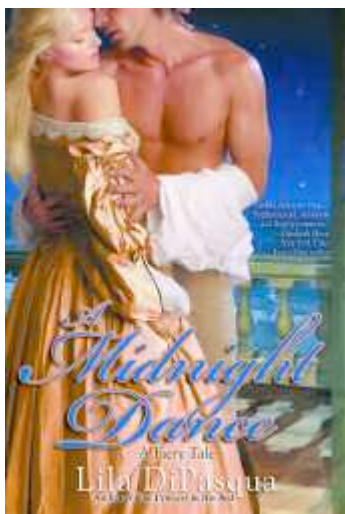
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Wife, mom and psychotherapist, Kris Kennedy left behind the office for the wilds of medieval England and Ireland, writing sexy, adventure-filled historical romances: *The Conqueror*, *The Irish Warrior*, and *Defiant*, with more on the way!

~ MELTING CHOCOLATE KISSES ~

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Jules stood ten feet away, silently watching her, firelight and moonlight illuminating his masculine beauty. Without a doubt, the man was pure male perfection. . .Did he have to look *that* good?

The corner of his attractive mouth lifted in a slight smile. "Shall we begin?" he said, his tone so sinfully sensuous.

She gulped quietly. "Of course." Sabine looked away and picked up the goblets off the log.

Turning to face him again, she was in time to see him pull his shirt over his head and toss it casually onto the blanket.

Her mouth fell agape.

There before her was a feast for the eyes. Unable to help herself, she devoured every beautiful dip and ripple on his strong chest and muscled abdomen. *Gracious God . . .*

"Elise?"

She felt her cheeks grow hot. Her whole body warmed. Yet she couldn't tear her eyes away from his stunning physique.

~ A MIDNIGHT DANCE ~ LILA DIPASQUA ~

"Huh?"

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his breeches. "We are going to have to be physically closer in order to have sex, no?" She heard amusement in his tone.

She jerked her gaze up to his and quickly clamped her gaping mouth shut. Giving herself a stern chastising, she forced herself to smile.

"Oh. Yes. Forgive me. I was simply admiring you." Did she sound pathetic or provocative? *Get up and go to him.* Why didn't her legs move?

With a lopsided grin, he approached her, his heated gaze fixing her to the spot.

He sat down before her on the fallen tree. His riveting half-naked body was so close, his handsome face so near. *Stop gawking! You'll make him suspicious. He'll think you're inexperienced.*

"Why don't we drink?" she quickly suggested and held out one of the goblets to him. If he took anything else off, she'd expire on the spot. As it was, her heart was trying to burst out of her chest.

To her joy, he took the goblet. His other hand reached out and grasped her braid.

Quietly, he studied it, his thumb caressing it as he had before. Her insides danced.

"The burgundy is quite good," she prompted.

"Undo the braid."

Her heart lurched. Sabine managed to maintain her smile. "The braid?" she repeated like an idiot. There was nothing wrong with her hearing.

He took her goblet out of her hand and set it down beside him on the tree trunk. "Yes. *The braid.*"

She looked at her goblet—an arm's length away—then back at him. Thankfully, he still held his goblet. He was watching her. Waiting for her to comply.

It's simply a braid. She could definitely do that.

"As you wish," she said, amazed at how calm she sounded while on the brink of discomposure. Untying the worn ribbon, she unbraided her hair for him.

"Run your fingers through it," he ordered. There was such hot desire in his eyes. It was intoxicating. And it amazed her. She still couldn't believe he wanted her. Or that he was even looking at her when in the past she'd been practically invisible to him. How many times had she craved a glance. His touch. His kiss. That was so long ago, a different time, before his kith and kin turned the world black.

~ MELTING CHOCOLATE KISSES ~

Threading her fingers in her hair, she complied with his request. Her blond hair swooshed back down, hanging loosely.

Taking one of her tresses, he brought the lock to his cheek and stroked it along his jaw. "You have beautiful hair," he said.

His words unbalanced her. That was the very same thing he'd said to her the night she'd slipped and lost her slipper. Only this time there was such a carnal quality to his words, her sex clenched in response.

" . . . Thank you. So do you." *So do you? What sort of imbecilic response is that?*

This would have been so much easier if he'd become potbellyed, bald, and had bad teeth.

Anxious to get this over with, she decided to move things along. Daringly, she dipped her finger into his goblet. Intending to put a drop on his lips, she said, "Would you like to try the wine?"

He caught her wrist before she touched him, his action surprising her.

Moving his goblet closer to her mouth, he released her wrist and said, "Ladies first."

Oh God. Remain calm. Don't overreact.

"You are most kind," she responded, recovering quickly, though her heart rhythm did not. She took hold of the goblet, her fingers inadvertently brushing his. Did he notice they trembled?

Her nerves and the extreme situation were clearly distorting her reactions to him. If she kept her head, maintained some semblance of control over herself, she'd prevail.

Looking down at the wine, she searched for direction. She wasn't about to drink any of it. This was difficult enough without some of the drugged wine in her system. What could she do? *Stay in character.* That was the answer. The key to success. She was playing the part of a whore, a seducer, an enticer.

She would entice him to drink even if that meant she had to delve deeper into her role. An idea came to her.

"Would you be so kind as to assist me—may I have your hand, please?" She held her hand out, waiting and praying he'd comply. There was curiosity in his eyes. And after what seemed an eternity, he placed his hand in hers. Carnal awareness crackled in the air between them. She could tell he felt it, too. The expression on his face had changed from desire to a feral hunger. It inflamed her further.

Her insides in havoc, Sabine glanced down at his hand in hers. It was strong, his fingers long, warm. She liked the feel of his skin.

~ A MIDNIGHT DANCE ~ LILA DIPASQUA ~

A little too much for her own good.

She couldn't allow herself to forget how his family had preyed on hers, overtaxing, overburdening. Living off their misery. She didn't feel sorry for what had become of him. Had he inherited his father's title and lands, there was no reason to believe he'd have cared a whit about the suffering of those who lived on his lands any more than his father had. He deserved his fall from "grace."

And he deserved what he had coming to him once she was through.

Knowing his palm would hold too much of the burgundy, she rotated his hand, tipped the goblet, and let a few drops land on the inside of his wrist.

Hesitating a moment to let most of the droplets run off, Sabine bent her head and pressed her lips to his skin.

The instant her mouth touched him, her senses were swamped by a heady rush. Her eyes fluttered shut. She forced them open, trying to recover her wits, yet she couldn't resist brushing her mouth lightly across his wrist. He made a sound from deep inside his throat. It reverberated in her feminine core.

Overcome by the warmth and texture of his skin, she lingered a moment longer then kissed his wrist. The urge to kiss him again gripped her fiercely. It took a moment to shake loose of its hold.

She pulled away slowly and met his gaze, her breathing sharper than before. And there was a pulsing between her legs that throbbed in time with the heavy thuds of her heart.

If she hadn't been so shaken, she would have been elated. She'd successfully avoided the tainted wine. But it had come at a price. The most private part of her body was now rioting and aching for relief.

She scrambled to find her voice. "The burgundy has never tasted finer," she somehow managed to say. "You should try it." She held the goblet out to him.

"Perhaps I should," he responded. Relieved, she almost wept when he took it from her hand.

Holding her gaze, he moved the goblet toward her then dripped a drop onto her bare shoulder. The wine was startlingly cool against her heated skin.

He leaned in.

Knowing he was going to press his mouth against her body, she braced herself for the thrill of it. The droplet had rolled down her arm before his lips finally grazed over her shoulder. She closed her eyes. The light flick of his tongue against her skin drew a moan

from her throat.

He pulled back, his mouth mere inches from hers, his breaths mingling with her own. "I'm not certain I like your wine. Perhaps I should try it again?"

She blinked. Unable to command her voice, she gave him a delayed nod.

The barest smile played across his mouth. He opened the top fastening on her bodice. Her eyes widened. And then he opened the next. *Dear God.*

Then another fastening.

And another.

Think of something! What could she say to stop him? She couldn't reveal her duplicity. She couldn't—*Oh!* Her opened bodice slipped off, revealing her chemise.

Amid her heightened distress, she felt a ludicrous pang of embarrassment. Her chemise, although clean, was old and worn. Not fancy or pretty like the undergarments she'd once owned. Like the ones worn by his former mistresses.

She looked away, unable to look into his eyes, trying desperately to think of a way to regain control of the unraveling situation.

He lowered her chemise to her waist. She swallowed down her protest, her upper body exposed, her breasts veiled by her hair.

He brushed the tresses aside, revealing her to the summer night and his gaze.

"Elise . . ." he said.

Unable to read much into his utterance, she cast him a sidelong glance, expecting to find him assessing her. Yet by his expression he seemed to be marveling at her instead.

His hand caressed the outside curve of her breast. She gasped at the jolt of erotic sensation. It drew his gaze back up to her face. Then it happened. He gave her one of his full knee-weakening smiles. Gorgeous dimples and all.

"You're exquisite. With the nipples of Venus," he said. "I wonder if they taste as good as they look." Dipping the tip of his finger into the wine, he placed a drop near her racing heart and watched with fascination as it ran down toward her nipple. She was frozen. Expectant of what he might do. Unable to stop it from happening.

The moment the droplet dripped off the tip of her breast, he slipped his arm around her waist, lowered his head, and sucked her nipple into his hot mouth. She cried out, and flung her arms around him, the pleasure so keen she all but swooned. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pressed her cheek against his dark hair. Each luscious pull

~ A MIDNIGHT DANCE ~ LILA DIPASQUA ~

of his mouth contracted her sex, deep delicious pulses that rippled to her clit.

She couldn't catch her breath. Not when he continued to ply her with skillful sucks, licks, bites. The sensations radiating from her breast were melting her mind.

She'd kept herself numb for so long. Yet the pleasure flooding through her was so intense, there was no containing it. Or controlling it

His mouth burned a path to her other breast and repeated the exquisite torture. Her head fell back. Her lips parted in a silent cry, lost to the hunger.

He had her arching and moaning, her breaths dragging up and down her throat.

He stopped suddenly. Sabine whimpered at the cessation. Dazed and panting, she snapped her eyes open, her body frantically clamoring for more.

He was smiling again.

"You have very sensitive breasts. I like that." He tossed the goblet with its contents behind him, onto the ground, dropped to his knees in front of her, and pulled her up tightly against him. She felt the solid bulge in his breeches.

He bent his head, his hair brushing her cheek. "We don't need wine," he murmured in her ear. "The carnal heat between us is intoxicating enough."

Before she could react, she found herself flat on her back staring up at him. He'd straddled her, his knees on either side of hers, and was bent over her, his palms near her head. She was caged in. All his potent male attention was focused on her.

She squirmed. She couldn't pull back. Nor could she cool down her overheated body. Yet she couldn't surrender herself. Not to *him*.

A devilish smile formed on his handsome face. "Beautiful forest fairy, you're all mine."

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www.LilaDiPasqua.com

Lila DiPasqua is a firm believer in the happily-ever-after. She writes steamy stories about historical alpha-heroes and the strong, smart heroines who make them lose their hearts.

~ MELTING CHOCOLATE KISSES ~

SWEET ENEMY HEATHER SNOW



Book cover not available at press time

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Coming in February 2012

A debut by an exciting new historical author

"Historical intrigue and heart-pounding passion make *Sweet Enemy* a great read. Romance fans will love it.

~#1 NYT Bestselling Author JULIE GARWOOD

Beakers and ball gowns don't mix, so when a lady chemist goes undercover as a husband hunter to investigate the earl whose family may have murdered her father, romance isn't part of her formula. But it only takes one kiss to start a reaction she can't control.

Find out what happens when he catches her snooping through his library at his mother's bride-hunt of a house party, and mistakes her intentions...

The wisps of hair near her brow had dampened into clinging curls. He remembered how she'd looked a moment ago, when he'd held her close. It was easy to imagine how she'd look in the throes of passion. Too damned easy.

Geoffrey snorted. Probably what the little minx was counting on. "It is common knowledge amongst the staff that I frequent the library at night." He suppressed the need to rub his lower back and instead, waved his hand in an irritated swipe. "It would be nothing for an enterprising young miss to ferret out that information and use it to her advantage."

And nothing for me to fall for it, as his quickening blood would attest.

Damn his mother for inviting all of these title-chasing vixens here. Ever since he'd inherited the bloody title, women threw themselves at him shamelessly. While some men might relish the attention, Geoffrey couldn't. He knew it wasn't *him* they wanted. For once, he'd like to meet a girl who wanted Geoffrey, not the Earl of Stratford.

Instead, he was always on guard. He'd already thwarted two husband hunters tonight. *Third time's a charm...* His eyes widened as a sick dread grabbed him.

"I presume your aunt is 'conveniently' posted outside?" He stalked to the entrance, ignoring Miss Claremont's gasp and wrenched the doors open, determined to set Lady Belsham straight before sending her and her intrepid charges packing, lateness of the hour be damned.

Relief washed through him at the empty hallway, mingled with an odd sense of deflation. He closed his eyes briefly, then turned on his heel and marched back into the library, careful to leave the doors open.

"You couldn't be more mistaken." Miss Claremont's chest rose and fell rapidly. "I did not come here tonight hoping to find you, and my aunt is most definitely *not* lurking in the hallway. Contrary to what you *and* she might think, not every woman's world revolves around catching a man."

Her words hung between them. Geoffrey furrowed his brow. What was her game? "Then why are you here?"

Her eyes darted around. "I...I couldn't sleep, so I thought to borrow a book."

"I don't mean tonight," Geoffrey clarified. "I meant, if you didn't come to this party in hopes of snagging a suitor like every other female in this house, why are you here?"

Miss Claremont looked discomfited by his direct question. Geoffrey didn't care. He believed in getting to the point. Life was too short to prevaricate.

Her pearl white teeth tugged at her lower lip as she scrambled for an explanation. That she didn't have one cemented his suspicions. Naïve girl. Any good husband-hunter would know to at least bring a witness.

"My cousin desired a companion," she offered finally, with a shrug. "As I thought a jaunt to the country would be ideal, I decided to join her. I understand Somerton Park's gardens are lovely."

He smiled. "They are," he acceded, all politeness, as if her excuses weren't a desperate attempt to salvage the situation. "The woodland and lakes are also spectacular. I do hope you find time to explore whilst you are here."

He suspected if he kissed her, she wouldn't protest. She was nervous, yes, but he could see desire on her face, hear it in her breathing, smell it on her skin—a heady ambrosia that drew him. He leaned in closer and inhaled her scent. Apples and...lemon verbena? Unfamiliar with women's fragrance, he could only be sure she smelled clean and crisp.

Her smile faded. "I will."

Geoffrey shook his head. She had to realize he didn't believe a word.

Not want a husband, indeed. What woman didn't? His eyes traveled over her burnished curls which glinted in the dim firelight, taking in her pixie-like face. He held her gaze for a moment before moving to her lush lips, her slender neck. He imagined he could see her pulse beating strongly in its delicate hollow. The dark dress she wore concealed ample curves, but his body tingled as he remembered the feel of her. Miss Claremont should have no trouble finding a husband, beautiful as she was. No man in his right mind would turn her out of his bed.

Just the thought of her in *his* bed made Geoffrey's loins tighten.

"Surely you can understand my *mistake*," he said, hoping his emphasis conveyed his doubt. "I wasn't expecting to encounter anyone here."

On the contrary, he'd wanted to escape the snares of the determined ladies who already hounded him. He'd also planned to go over Somerton Park's accounts again. Frustration had been gnawing at him for weeks. He knew he was missing something in the complicated mess that was the Wentworth finances, and he was anxious to get it sorted. Particularly if the discrepancies might be related to the blackmail threat he'd received last week.

Yet a different frustration swirled around him now, growing with each moment in Miss Claremont's presence.

"Nor was I, my lord," Miss Claremont said, bringing his attention back to her. A delicate pink stained her cheeks. "And though I suspect it was you who knocked me from the rolling ladder," she said, glancing pointedly at the bookshelf, which now stood open to reveal the hidden passageway from which he'd entered, "I suppose I must thank you for your timely rescue, nonetheless." She raised a chestnut brow.

He'd be damned if for a brief moment he didn't feel badly for deigning to enter his own library. Geoffrey tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. She wouldn't turn this around on him so easily. He'd had enough of being manipulated for one day and more than enough of calculating women. Left unchecked, Miss Claremont would likely grow as devious as his mother. Unless someone dissuaded her from that path, showed her she could not play games without consequence.

"I wouldn't offer thanks yet," he murmured. Miss Claremont's haughty expression slipped as he moved to the open doors of the library. Yes. Enlightening Miss Claremont would be a service to unsuspecting men everywhere and besides, something about the woman tempted him fiercely. He couldn't deny that he wanted to taste her.

And since he was certain no one else was near, he could think of nothing he'd rather do than show the scheming Miss Claremont what happened to young ladies who placed themselves alone with men in darkened rooms.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice rising. "Surely there's no need to call attention..."

Her voice trailed off as Geoffrey drew the double doors closed. The audible click of the lock echoed in the now silent room.

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Geoffrey turned to face her. Her eyes shone bright in the low light, and she glanced toward the opening in the bookshelves as if it offered escape. She visibly tensed and shifted on her feet. Good. She should be wary. He smiled as he advanced upon her.

"Why would I wish to call attention to us, Miss Claremont?" he asked lightly, stepping closer as she backed herself against a bookcase. "As I've made it clear I have no intention of being found in a compromising position." He stopped directly before her and rested his hands on the shelves on either side of her waist.

Her amethyst eyes widened. With a directness that both surprised and inflamed him, she searched his face. Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and her pink tongue darted out to wet her own lips. By God, the little minx was curious. Geoffrey sucked in a breath, curiosity tingling through him as well.

He suspected if he kissed her, she wouldn't protest. She was nervous, yes, but he could see desire on her face, hear it in her breathing, smell it on her skin—a heady ambrosia that drew him. He leaned in closer and inhaled her scent. Apples and...lemon ver-bena? Unfamiliar with women's fragrance, he could only be sure she smelled clean and crisp.

Her voice snagged as she asked, "A-and this is not compromising, my lord?"

"Ah," he drawled, "that is the rub." He brought one hand up to her nape, using his thumb to caress her cheek and jaw, steeling himself against the jolt of pleasure he received just from touching her. She would be the one learning a lesson here tonight, not him. "To be well and truly compromised in Society's eyes, my dear, one has to have a witness."

Her eyes flew to his, uncertainty lightening them a shade to the most alluring lilac. "As there is no one here but you and I," he whispered, "I could taste you," he said, brushing his lips against hers in a light caress. She trembled, but did not jerk away. "Touch you," he murmured, trailing a finger down her neck to nearly graze the swell of her bosom before detouring to her delicate collarbone. Her chest hitched beneath his touch. "Anywhere," he purred as he took her lips in a kiss meant to scandalize.

Apples and lemons enveloped him. Christ, he'd never get the scent of her out of his memory.

She accepted his tongue with a hesitation that told him she'd never been kissed. His instincts whispered to hold back, but then she returned the kiss with a fervor that fired his blood.

He couldn't stop his hand from sliding into her silken hair, tug-

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ging it from its pins as he luxuriated in the feel of her tresses. His other hand held her still so he could explore her mouth fully. He couldn't get enough, couldn't get...

Only when he heard his own moan did Geoffrey recall where he was, and with whom. He sucked a deep breath through his nose and gentled the kiss.

He wasn't a cad, after all. He just wanted to teach her a lesson in managing men, particularly him—*don't even try it*. He indulged himself with one last lingering taste, then stepped back from Miss Claremont, shaken at how ragged his breathing still was. He couldn't let her see how she affected him. He waited until she opened her dazed eyes and smiled grimly.

"I can do all that and still not have to marry you in the morning."

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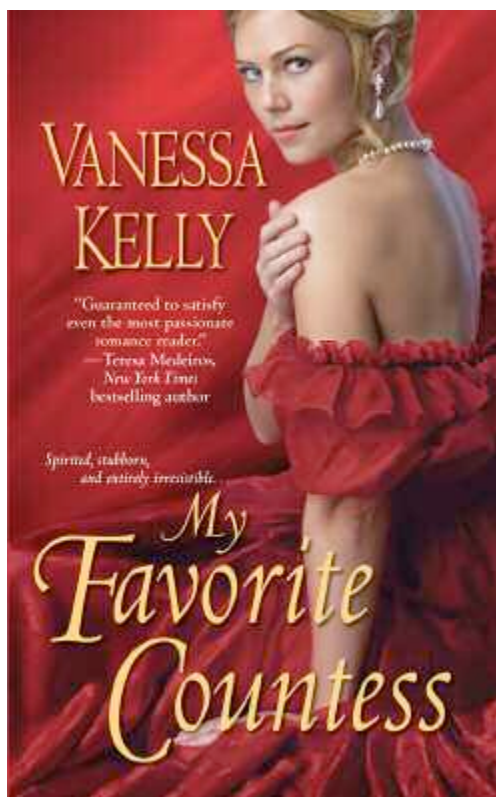
Heather Snow is a historical romance author with a degree in Chemistry who found she much preferred creating chemistry on the page, rather than in the lab.

She lives in the Midwest with her husband, two rambunctious boys and one very put upon cat. She loves to hear from readers, and can be reached at Heather@HeatherSnowBooks.com.

Sweet Enemy is Heather's debut historical romance, and the first in the *Veiled Seduction* series.

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~ MELTING CHOCOLATE KISSES ~
MY FAVORITE COUNTESS
VANESSA KELLY



A widowed countess needing a rich husband and a physician devoted to his work among London's poor: Bathsheba, Lady Randolph, and Dr. John Blackmore live worlds apart. But despite his best judgment, John can't keep away from her. He's not what Bathsheba needs either, but she knows it's only a matter of time until she surrenders her body, and perhaps her heart...

Bathsheba gasped and opened her lips to the onslaught of Blackmore's ravening mouth. Heat swamped her, softening her limbs and sending a luxurious pulse to the deepest parts of her body. She sagged against him as one of his arms lashed around her waist, pulling her flush with his muscular torso.

His tongue surged past her teeth, caressing her mouth with a coffee-flavored sweep. She moaned, so completely taken by the hot power of the kiss that she could do nothing but open to him, answering his need with a matching hunger. His taste, the wet glide of his mouth slanting across hers, sang deep in her veins, blasting away exhaustion from illness and pain from anger and grief. Amazement blossomed within her as she recognized the pull of desire—the sweet ache of sensual yearning she hadn't felt in such a long time.

He answered her moan with a rumble deep in his throat, a low animal sound that triggered a soft release of dampness between her thighs. She clutched the front of his coat, digging her fingers into the expensive fabric, holding on as if her life depended on it.

As if responding to her desperation, he captured her in an unyielding embrace. One arm circled her waist and the other went round her shoulders, pulling her firmly against his chest. His careful physician's touch had fled, replaced by the hard grip of a conquering male.

Bathsheba whimpered and he deepened the kiss. He claimed her, exploring her mouth with a passion so brutally possessive and yet so erotic she melted against him. Her legs began to tremble and the breath seized in her throat. She pushed weakly at his chest, struggling to pull in air.

John relaxed his grip and released her from the kiss. She gasped, pulling in huge gulps of air as she stared into his face. The hot look that gleamed in his eyes—the ferocity of his lust—quickly turned those small shivers running down her legs into quaking tremors. Part of her, the most feminine part, responded to his desire to dominate her. But she had seen that look before on other men's faces, and it sent a chill snaking up her spine.

He must have sensed her anxiety because he seemed to wage a short battle for control. He eased her back, gentling his touch, but did not let her out of the circle of his arms. She couldn't utter a word, only able to stare at his hard, sensual mouth, still damp from their kiss.

John closed his eyes and drew in a harsh breath, his chest shud-

dering with the strain. When he opened them again, some of the wildness had faded. But the very air around them shimmered with an insidious, seductive heat.

"Damn it all, woman." His voice sounded strangled in his throat. "I must be losing my mind. What are you doing to me?"

He rested his forehead against hers for a moment before straightening. With a gentle hand, he brushed a few stray curls back from her forehead.

"Um," she stuttered, trying to clear the woolly feeling from her brain. "I believe I was asking you to accept my apology. And I think you just did."

He gave a harsh crack of laughter. "Is that what it was? How foolish of me not to have realized."

He smiled and brushed a
feather-light kiss across her lips.
Desire rustled again, hot and dark
in her belly. He was so dangerous.
And he certainly wasn't what she
needed. But still...

She settled more comfortably into his arms, staring into his lean, handsome face. He didn't seem inclined to let her go and, just for a minute, she allowed herself to feel completely besotted with him. That smoldering look returned to his eyes and she couldn't hold back a little sigh of satisfaction.

"You're playing a dangerous game, my sweet," he murmured, ducking his head so he could nuzzle his mouth against her cheek.

She tilted her head, giving him better access. "I know. But it's so much fun."

He trailed a string of damp kisses along her jaw, and a throbbing hum of desire rolled through her veins.

"I'm such a fool," he groaned. The words vibrated against the sensitive flesh of her neck. She shivered.

"The last thing I should be doing is kissing my patient out here in broad daylight. On the terrace, where anyone could see us," he said.

"I know." She giggled. She never giggled.

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He gave another one of those delicious growls and she squirmed against the erection that now lay hard and heavy against her pelvis. It felt so wonderful—better than anything she could remember in a long, long time. Lord, she'd missed that feeling, even though the intensity of his passion made her brain raise a warning flag.

It was a warning she decided to ignore.

She reached up and tangled her fingers in his thick hair, bringing their faces, their mouths, just a breath of air apart.

"You are a fool," she whispered. "But don't stop. Not yet."

He groaned, and this time his kiss was impossibly tender, sweeter than she could have imagined. He took his time, playing with her, slanting his lips across her mouth in a slow, moist slide. She snuggled against him as he held her in a gentle but all-encompassing embrace.

The kiss went on forever. Slow, wet, and so hot she thought she would melt. Then it grew more urgent. His hands moved up to her face, holding her still as he deepened the connection between them. Long fingers traced the curve of her jaw, drifted down to caress her neck. She squirmed against him, seeking to ease the ache between her thighs. One of his hands wandered down and curled around her bottom. He lifted her enough to slide his leg between her thighs.

She gasped, arching back as the muscles deep in her core spasmed in a fast, tight contraction. Her heart slammed with a hard jerk, and she instinctively pushed down.

A moment later he cursed and broke away, holding her at arm's length. She blinked up at him, dappled sunlight obscuring her vision while a hazy sensuality clouded her brain.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

His jaw dropped. "What's wrong? I'm one minute away from dragging you back to that chaise and getting you flat on your back. That's what's wrong. We can't do this, Bathsheba. Not here. Not now."

She couldn't break free of the sensual daze that gripped her. "We could go up to my room. I'll tell my cousin that I'm not feeling well. That you want to give me an examination. No one has to know."

His lips peeled back over strong white teeth and he growled—actually growled—at her. She felt the luscious sound of it deep in her womb.

"That's a very bad idea, my lady," he said. "Because once I get

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you on your back, you're not moving from that position for a very long time. And once I've had you that way, I can think of at least a dozen other ways to take you, as well. So unless you're ready for all that, I suggest it would be wise for you to let me go."

The crudity of his suggestion slapped her like a driving gust of sleet. She stepped hastily away from him, stumbling over one of the broken stones on the terrace. His hand shot out to steady her.

"Easy," he said. "You're not ready for this."

Bathsheba swallowed, suddenly feeling nervous and vulnerable. He was right. She wasn't ready. She might never be ready and, in any event, he was the wrong man. She didn't need a lover, especially one who looked at her with such unfettered desire, such hot lust. One who threatened to consume her with passion and make her as dependent on him as she had once been on Reggie.

The thought of her husband made her suck in a fearful breath.

Blackmore muttered something and took her arm in a gentle clasp. "Come, my lady." He steered her back to the chaise. "You need rest, not a great brute like me pawing away at you. I should be taken out behind the barn and shot."

She sank gratefully onto the cushions. He hunkered down beside her, carefully inspecting her face. One hand reached out to brush her cheek.

"Better now?" he asked in a soothing voice.

Blackmore was nothing like Reggie. Nothing like any other man she had ever known. The hell of it was, he might be exactly what she wanted—at least for now—but he wasn't what she needed. She needed a rich husband and, preferably, a boring and safe one. Blackmore wasn't safe, and he never would be. He was the most dangerous man she'd ever met. She'd lose herself in him if she wasn't careful.

"My lady?" he prompted.

"Yes?" she said, forgetting what he had asked her.

He smiled and brushed a feather-light kiss across her lips. Desire rustled again, hot and dark in her belly. He was so dangerous. And he certainly wasn't what she needed. But still...

"Are you sure you have to go?" she asked in a dreamy voice. "Why don't you stay for the festival? No one will pay any attention to us, not later, anyway. When night falls—"

A flash of something hot and fierce flared in his eyes. Then it vanished. He rose to his feet and took one step back, but the distance seemed much greater.

~ MY FAVORITE COUNTESS ~ VANESSA KELLY ~

"I've already stayed away from London for too long. I can no longer afford to neglect my patients or my work at the hospital. Please forgive me."

She started to flinch, stung by his rejection, but forced herself to hold still. But Blackmore, damn him, must have seen the small movement.

He cast a rueful smile and took her hand. "Believe me when I tell you I would much rather remain in Ripon."

She tugged her hand away and gave him a tight smile. "Well, I'm sure you're needed a great deal more in London than here. Have a safe journey, Doctor, and thank you for all your help. I'll make your good-byes to Lord Randolph."

She reached for her bonnet and made a show of putting it on, determined not to let him see how much he had wounded her. It was all for the best, she silently argued. She did not need another stupid affair with a man who could give her nothing. Nothing but passion, which never led to anything but pain.

He stared down at her but she refused to meet his gaze. After a few moments he gave a quick bow, turned on his heel and strode away, disappearing through the library doors.

Bathsheba sat quietly with her face tilted to the sunlight, listening to the sounds of the day and waiting for the ache in her heart to subside. When that didn't happen, she slowly rose from the chaise and made her way into the shadowed coolness of the house.

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My Favorite Countess is Vanessa Kelly's third historical novel. Her earlier books are *Mastering The Marquess* and *Sex And The Single Earl*. She also has a novella in the recently released anthology, *An Invitation To Sin*. Learn more about her books at www.vanessakellyauthor.com

WICKED IN YOUR ARMS

SOPHIE JORDAN

One of the most notoriously eligible bachelors in Europe is finally ready to marry . . .

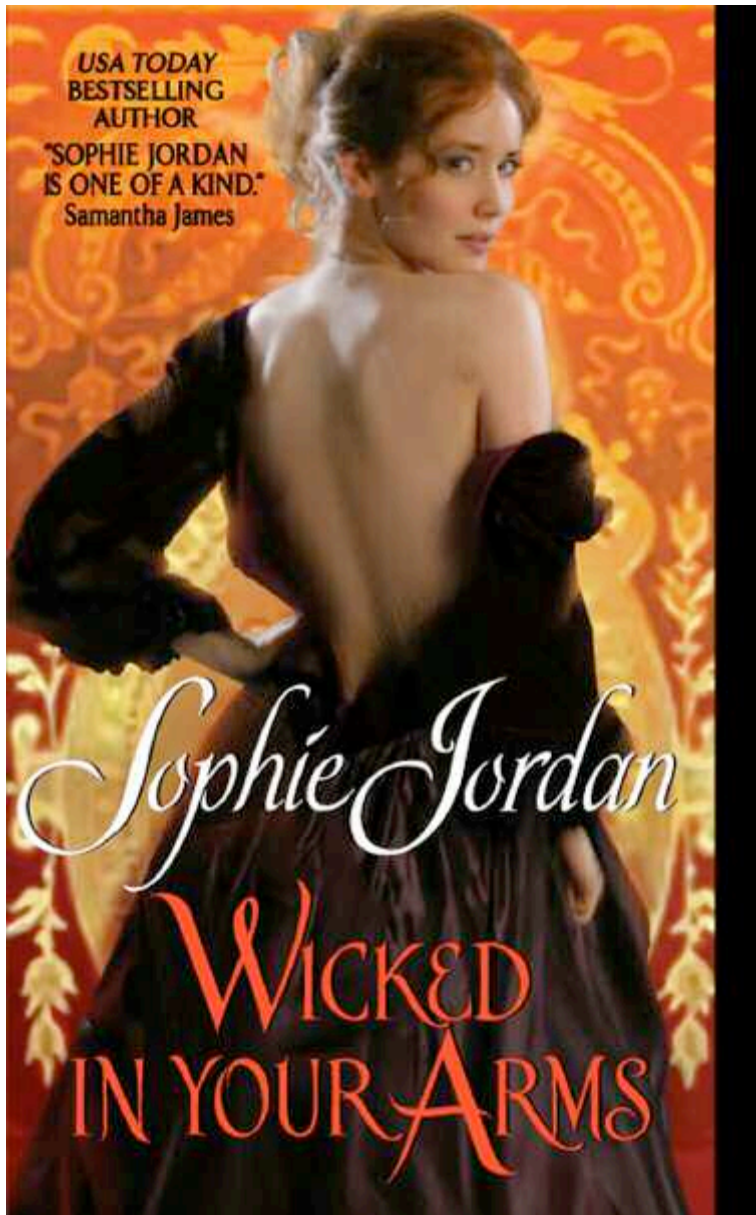
For fiercely independent Grier Hadley, being the illegitimate daughter of one of London's most unsavory characters has only one advantage: an enormous, ill-gotten dowry.

Prince Sevastian Maksimi knows where his duty lies: he must find a well-bred young lady—one with a considerable fortune to her name—wed her promptly, and get to the business of producing an heir.

The last thing Grier needs is some unattainable prince curling her toes with his smoldering glances and wicked suggestions.

As far as Sev is concerned, she lacks the breeding to become a princess. And yet one kiss from this arresting female is all it takes for him to realize that anyone else in his arms would be unthinkable . . .

~ WICKED IN YOUR ARMS ~ SOPHIE JORDAN ~



Grier glared down at where he gripped her arm. “Perhaps ladies in your country find primeval manhandling charming. Why don’t you seek one of them out and unhand me?”

He said nothing. Simply stared, clinging to her arm with hard fingers.

She inhaled raggedly, her chest rising and falling with deep breaths. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so angry. And truth be told, it wasn’t all entirely at him. She found herself frustrated at herself, at this whole wretched scenario. Finding a husband ... a man who only wanted to marry her for her sudden fortune ... It was becoming quite the distasteful task, contrary to the hope she had felt when she started this whole endeavor.

She shook her head. This night had simply been too much. She glared down at his hand on her arm. He followed her gaze before looking back up at her. Even garbed in her silks and satins, Grier felt out of place, an imposter in his glittering world.

The moment stretched interminably, so unbearably intense as they stared at each other that Grier thought she could hear the rush of blood in her ears.

She felt the clear shape of his hand, each press of his fingers over her arm. Awareness of their closeness, the intimacy of the situation, came crashing down over her. Her gaze flicked around the empty music room with its lonely instruments.

Her skin snapped, awake and alive. In fact all of her felt alive.

More alive than she had felt in quite some time.

Her gaze drifted, settled on his perfectly carved lips. Temptation incarnate. A man’s lips should not look so beautiful. He was as seductive as the princes of all her girlhood fairytales. For a moment she allowed herself to forget that this prince lacked the heroic qualities to go along with such looks, that he thought her unsuitable, a mere nobody rubbing elbows with her betters.

With a deep breath, she let herself forget all of that. She let herself step outside her numb self and dive into *life*.

Before she could regain her common sense and think to stop herself — before she could let *him* think enough to stop her — she stood on her tiptoes and slid a hand around his neck, delighting in the sensation of his silky hair against her fingers.

This. She’d have *this* before sentencing herself to a cold marriage of practicality, to a life of loneliness.

For a moment, Grier glimpsed the prince’s widening eyes as she pressed her lips to his. Her heart beat so fiercely she feared it might burst from her chest.

~ WICKED IN YOUR ARMS ~ SOPHIE JORDAN ~

Then she saw nothing as her eyes fluttered shut.

In closing her eyes, she only *felt*. She surrendered herself to sensation, to the waking of desire within her blood.

She was no stranger to kisses, but it had been a while. The moment she tasted the prince's lips, she knew he was the perfect cure for her numbness.

For a several heartbeats he didn't move. He held himself as still as marble against her, and she feared his rejection. That he would set her from him. Then his arms slipped around her and he was kissing her back, his lips parting against hers.

She opened her own mouth with a small gasp at the suddenness of his reaction. He swallowed that sound, drank it deep into himself. She pressed herself closer, tighter against him, her muscles straining to get ever nearer.

A shudder racked him as she tentatively tasted him with her tongue. She buried her hands in his hair, pulling him down just as he urged her up against him. He tasted her back and she moaned at the sinuous stroking of his tongue along her own.

His large hands roamed over her back, holding her tightly, fiercely. One of those hands slid around to span her ribcage, his thumb grazing the underside of one aching breast and her body burned from the inside out.

There was nothing delicate or dandified in the way he kissed. She felt consumed. By her own desire and by the magic of his expert mouth on hers. Her hands delved deeper into his hair. With a hard tug on the strands, she forced his head to a different angle, positioning his head for her and slanting her mouth against his one way, and then another. She didn't know herself, this woman losing herself, taking, seizing what she craved as if it were hers. As if he were hers.

He groaned into her mouth. The sound shuddered through her.

She relished the feverish movement of his lips, the slide of his tongue deep in her mouth. Her made her feel wanted, and that made her feel powerful.

She burned from the inside out. In that moment, she didn't feel as if any of it could ever be enough — as if she could ever have enough of him.

Impossible as it seemed, the kiss deepened. They staggered together, clutching one another, stopping only when they collided with a pianoforte.

She nipped at his bottom lip and then sucked the bruised flesh into her mouth, clutching his head closer to her starving mouth.

And still she wasn't close enough. Her body hummed, alive

~ MELTING CHOCOLATE KISSES ~

and awake as she had never felt. That's all that mattered. The extraordinary thrill of this moment.

She wanted to crawl into his drugging warmth, let it continue its waking heat through her. Nothing could ruin this moment.

Nothing except him.

As she dragged her lips to his jaw, kissing his bristly flesh, his voice rumbled in her ear. "My, my, Miss Hadley, I had no idea such a hellcat lurked beneath. Perhaps you've reconsidered my offer."

She stilled, his words sinking in, reminding her where she was, who she was ... who he was.

The fire in her blood cooled. The humming life that had so thrilled her slipped away until she was naught but the cold, numb shell again.

His hand drifted up from her ribcage to brush over her breast. The touch jolted her, sparked her to move, to react as any female of proper breeding should. *As any unwed female who had not initiated a passionate kiss would do.*

The crack of her palm against his cheek rang through the cavernous room. His arms dropped from her.

She stumbled away, gaping at him as he lifted a hand to his cheek, fingering the afflicted flesh.

"What was that for?" he demanded.

"You—you—" Her hand waved between the two of them, words of outrage strangling in her throat.

"Kissed you *back*?" he finished.

"No!" she denied. "You touched—" She swallowed, unable to say it, unable to face how close she had come to surrendering herself to the wretch. "You touched *me. Intimately.*"

"The way you *attacked* me with your lips, is it any surprise?"

"So this is *my* fault?" she charged, even as a small voice inside her head whispered, *yes. This is your fault. You attacked him with your lips like a man-starved harlot.*

Heat swept over her face. "You were hardly a victim of my attentions."

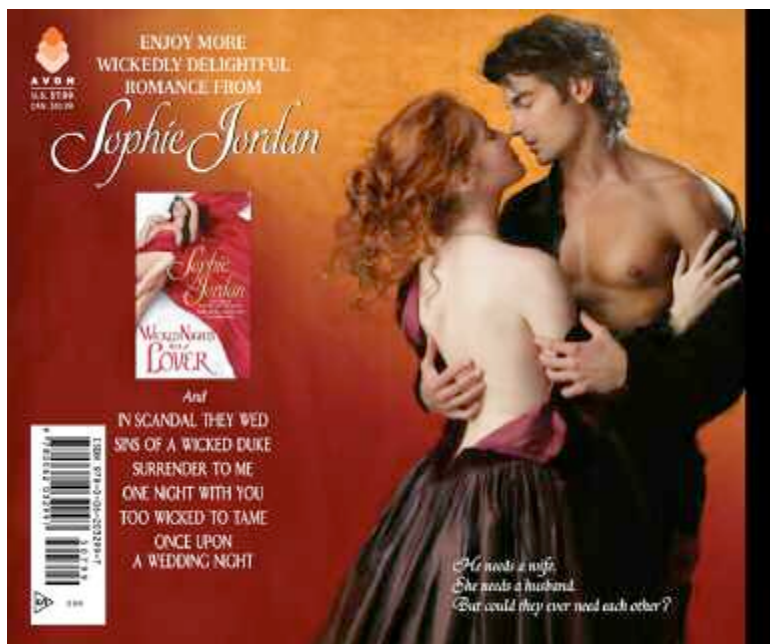
He shrugged in the shadowy room. "Precisely. Which is why I did not expect my touch would be unwelcome to a female so eager to kiss me in the first place."

Mortified, she closed her eyes in a slow blink. She could deny nothing he said. She'd behaved the wanton and then slapped him when he reciprocated.

She opened her mouth to apologize. For everything. The kiss. The slap.

Only she didn't get the chance to utter those difficult words ...

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New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Sophie Jordan grew up in the Texas hill country where she wove fantasies of dragons, warriors, and princesses. A former high school English teacher, she now lives in Houston with her family. When she's not writing, she spends her time overloading on caffeine (lattes and Diet cherry Coke preferred), talking plotlines with anyone who will listen (including her kids), and cramming her DVR with true-crime and reality-TV shows. Sophie also writes young adult novels for HarperTeen and paranormal romances under the name Sharie Kohler.



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