



A Lady of Persuasion (Wanton Dairymaid Trilogy)

By Tessa Dare

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Tessa Dare spins a witty, wanton tale of passion and conquest, as a reformer and a rake find unexpected love.

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

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

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Editorial Review

Review

“Prepare to fall in love.”—Julia Quinn

“The sweetest, sexiest romance you’ll read all year.”—Eloisa James

About the Author

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

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Chapter One

Sir Tobias Aldridge was contemplating an act of coldblooded murder.

Failing that, an act of barbarous incivility.

By nature, Toby wasn’t one to hold a grudge. As a gentleman of rank, wealth, and unarguable good looks, he’d never received a slight he couldn’t simply laugh off. He called every man friend, and no man enemy.

Until now.

“So that’s him.” Toby glared at the man twirling a fair-haired beauty across the gleaming parquet—Benedict “Gray” Grayson. The scoundrel who’d stolen Toby’s bride, his future, and his very respectability, then returned to a bloody hero’s welcome.

“That’s him. Here, have a brandy.” His host, Jeremy Trescott, the Earl of Kendall, extended a glass.

Toby accepted the drink and downed a quick, blistering swallow. “I could call him out,” he murmured behind the glass. “I could call him out and shoot him dead to - night, in your garden.”

Jeremy shook his head. “You’re not going to do that.”

“Why not? You don’t think I have it in me?” Toby gave a bitter laugh. “Don’t you read the papers, Jem? That affable Sir Toby is a phantom of the past, and good riddance to him. Where did honor and decency get me, I ask you? Jilted, and replaced by a thieving, unprincipled bastard.”

“Gray’s not a bastard. He’s the legitimate nephew of a duchess.”

“Oh, yes. And now a knight, as well. What isn’t he? If you listen to the talk, *Sir* Benedict’s a shipping financier, a West Indian planter, a feared privateer, a paragon of valor . . .” Toby shook his head. “I know the truth. He’s the thieving bastard who seduced my intended bride. It’s within my rights to call him out.”

“Even if you *could* do it,” his friend said tersely, “you’re not going to do it. This is Lucy’s first ball. She’s been planning it for months. If you turn it into scandal-sheet fodder, I’ll take you into the garden and gut you myself.”

“Well, if you didn’t want scandal, you shouldn’t have invited me. So long as I have the devil’s own reputation, I might as well live up to it.”

“You ought to rise above it.” Jeremy lowered his voice.

“Listen, you’re bound to meet with them at some point. Gray’s bringing out his younger sister this year, and they’ll be at every major social event. Best to make your public reconciliation now and quell the gossip. Why do you think Lucy and I planned a ball so early in the Season?”

“Because if you waited a few months she’d be too round?” Eager to change the subject, Toby clapped his friend on the shoulder. He had no intention of reconciling with Grayson, publicly or otherwise. Ever. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“How did you know Lucy’s with child?”

Toby made eye contact with his friend’s wife across the ballroom, as she weaved through the crush of guests. For years, Lucy Waltham Trescott had dogged their annual hunting excursions at Henry Waltham’s estate. She’d harbored a girlish infatuation for Toby but had forgotten him quickly enough when Jeremy captured her heart last autumn.

He said, “I’ve three older sisters, and ten nieces and nephews to date. I can tell. A woman’s face gets a bit rounder, her hair shines. And her bosom, it . . .” Jeremy shot him a glare, and Toby sipped his brandy. “Right, well. I can just tell.”

Lucy reached them, and Toby fortified his smile. He’d be damned if he’d let this assembly catch him wearing any expression other than his usual rakish grin.

“Toby!” Lucy exclaimed, taking his hands. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“Look at you, Luce.” He gave her a sweeping gaze and an appreciative wink. The once-hoydenish twig of a girl had blossomed into the lovely, confident Countess of Kendall. “Stunning. Most beautiful lady in the room.” Lucy made a dismissive wave of her hand, but behind the gesture she blushed to the ears. Just as he’d known she would. Toby leaned in to kiss her cheek, ignoring Jeremy’s forbidding glare.

“I know you say that to all the ladies,” Lucy said. She gave him a cautious look. “Sophia looks well, doesn’t she?”

“Oh, she’s radiant.” Toby forced his grin wider as the Graysons waltzed by, Sophia’s flaxen hair and porcelain complexion an elegant ivory blur. “Incandescent, even. She has the look of a woman in love.”

Sophia had never looked incandescent with him.

Lucy seemed to read his thoughts. She laid a hand on his sleeve. “Toby. You weren’t in love with her, either.” He shrugged. Lucy spoke the truth, but the truth didn’t help.

“What’s done is done. You’ve got to move on.” Jeremy nodded toward the crush of guests. “It’s a new Season, man. There’s a fresh crop of debutantes just waiting to experience the renowned Sir Toby charm. Surely one of them has caught your eye.”

Toby considered. True, a fresh conquest might provide a welcome diversion from murderous rage. He’d always been a favorite with the debutantes. But lately, there was scarcely any challenge to it. His scandal-sheet notoriety as the “Rake Reborn” had the mamas on alert and the young ladies in a flutter. All he had to do was appear. “Now that you mention it, there was one . . . just one.” Toby scanned the ballroom for a glimpse of vibrant emerald silk. There was only one lady who’d caught his eye even briefly since he’d made his entrance. He knew he’d never seen her before— he certainly wouldn’t have forgotten her if he had.

Ah, there she was. An intriguing dark- haired beauty unlike any other lady in the room. Unlike any lady he’d ever seen. Until now, he’d caught only glimpses of her through the churning sea of dancers— a flash of emerald, a cascade of raven hair, a swatch of honey- gold skin. Now she lined up with the ladies in preparation for a reel, and he had his first opportunity to study her in full view.

She was tall. Not nearly so tall as he, but taller than the ladies she stood amongst, and possessed of a lushly proportioned figure. The cut of her gown was modest, but she was the kind of woman who managed to look indecent, even fully clothed. Hers was a body plucked straight from some harem fantasy— full breasts, flared hips, long legs.

Toby watched as she favored her dance partner with the hint of a smile. That subtle curve of her lips was somehow more sensuous than any other curve of her body. Desire sparked through him, surprising him with its intensity. His whole body thrummed with that base, ineloquent instinct in which every seduction, no matter how suave, took its root:

I want that.

Who was she? She was in her first Season, most certainly. With her beauty, she could not last more than a few months on the marriage mart— even if her dowry were made up of cocklesHELLS.

Toby shifted to view the row of gentlemen lined up opposite, to discern the identity of her partner. “Bloody hell.”

It couldn’t be. She was partnered with Grayson, the thieving bastard. It wasn’t enough he’d already stolen the woman Toby had planned to marry— now he had to strut and impress the debutantes, too? Damn it, they were Toby’s territory. Now what had begun as vague, lustful inclination firmed into a plan:

I want that.

And I’m going to take it.

“Fancy a reel, Luce?”

“Why, I had not—”

Without waiting for her answer, Toby took Lucy by the hand and tugged her onto the dance floor, wedging their way into the queued- up dancers just instants before the music began. He’d positioned himself at Grayson’s shoulder, and though he bowed to Lucy as the first chords were struck, he kept his gaze slanted

toward the beauty in green silk beside her.

The dance was one patterned in groups of three couples, requiring much interchange between adjacent partners, just as Toby had hoped. At regular intervals, he would have occasion to take his emerald-clad vision by the hand, exchange a few words, twirl her dizzy, and— if all that failed to render her breathless— flash his most winning smile.

But all in good time.

Winning over a lady was a matter of strategy, of patience. The first contact must not be skin-to-skin, nor even glove-to-glove, but solely eye-to-eye. Toby moved forward to bow to her, his gaze riveted to hers. Her eyes were remarkable. Wide-set, almond-shaped, and fringed with sable lashes. So large and serious, they seemed to swallow up the rest of her face. For a moment, he let himself sink into those dark, placid pools.

He had a devil of a struggle fishing himself back out.

A few bars later, he was still recovering when the pattern compelled him to take her hand. He seized her gloved fingers firmly. The soft fabric heated between them as they circled, becoming warm and pliant as skin. Her bare flesh would feel like this, he thought. Satinsmooth. Supple. Hot to the touch as his hands glided under that cool silk to explore her every enticing curve. It would have the texture of cream against his tongue. Lord. Toby hauled on his mental reins before those thoughts carried him away. Never before had he felt such a thrill simply taking a lady's hand. But then, never before had he seduced a woman straight from the arms of his enemy.

"Toby." Lucy beckoned him with a twitch of her fingers, and Toby realized they'd fallen behind in the pattern. "Right. Beg pardon." He leapt forward to claim Lucy's hands and sweep her down the dance. "And I apologize in advance, for what is about to occur."

Her eyes flared. "Toby, no. You can't make a scene." "Oh, but I could. I could denounce Grayson and Sophia in front of the entire ballroom. Everyone thinks they're the golden couple, the freshly knighted hero and his beautiful, innocent bride? I could expose the truth." "And I could expose your innards." Lucy's fingernails dug into his arm, proving a fierce huntress still prowled within that elegant exterior. "You wouldn't dare. I've been planning this evening for months, Toby."

The dance parted them before Toby could respond. Then the lady in green silk smiled, and something in his chest pulled tight. He couldn't have spoken if he'd tried. It was perfect, that smile, composed of full, sensuous lips the color of fine Madeira. Lips designed for sin, framing an innocent row of pearly teeth. And about the corners of her mouth, the slightest hint of melancholy— just enough to intrigue the mind, stir the heart. Those lips defied mere admiration; they wanted a kiss.

There was only one thing wrong with that smile.

It wasn't directed at him. That bastard Grayson was its lucky recipient, and it was all Toby could do not to thrust out his boot and trip the man as he moved forward to take the beauty's hands.

Tempting, that idea— but inconceivable. Toby might scuff his boot.

No, he would exact his revenge more subtly, more justly. No messy duel, no public denouncement. Did

not the Bible advise an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth . . . or, in this case, a lady for a lady?

When the pattern brought them together again, he pulled his dark- haired temptress close— so close the green silk of her gown tangled with his legs. Her scent teased him: a crisp, fresh- smelling blend of verbena and citrus.

Tightening his grip on her arm, he whispered just as they parted: “I must tell you a secret.”

He squeezed her fingers before releasing them, allowing his thumb to brush the sensitive center of her palm.

He fancied he heard her gasp.

Grayson cast him a wary look. Toby’s arrogance made a feast of it.

He turned back to the lady in green. “You will be shocked,” he murmured as they brushed by one another again, “but it cannot be helped.”

He did not imagine her gasp that time, nor the flush that bloomed from her hairline to her bosom. Lord, she had the most magnificent bosom, and now it was lifting slightly with her every breath, straining the seams of her bodice. Tearing his eyes from the sight was quite possibly the most difficult thing he’d ever done.

An eternity passed before the pattern re united them. Toby dutifully twirled and promenaded, avoiding Lucy’s inquisitive glances by watching *her* instead. Within him, bitter envy twined with lust. Admiration glowed on her face as she regarded her partner. He despised Grayson more every moment.

When at last he rejoined the lady in green, it was with profound, bone- deep relief. As though he’d journeyed to the Holy Land and back to earn her favor, rather than circling a ballroom. If he’d tried, he couldn’t have explained the sense of purpose and destiny that gripped him. This jaunty reel had become a mission, more serious than any undertaking of his life.

He kept up a low, seductive rush of words as they traced a tight spiral, denying her any opportunity to respond. “I am drawn to you. I haven’t taken my eyes from you all eve ning. I am enraptured.”

He was a liar.

Isabel Grayson trembled as she resumed her place in the line. Her heart pounded a wild rhythm, twice the tempo of the reel. Fortunately, the pattern now afforded her a few bars of rest. She ventured a furtive glance in the gentleman’s direction, only to encounter the disquieting appraisal in his eyes.

Blushing, she dropped her gaze to the floor.

I am drawn to you, he’d said. *I haven’t taken my eyes from you all eve ning*.

A lie, a lie. His eyes had most definitely *not* followed her all eve ning. If they had, Bel would have noticed— for she’d been staring at him the whole time.

How could she not stare? He was, quite simply, the most handsome man she’d ever seen, despite the fact she’d grown up in the company of three exceedingly handsome men: her father and two brothers. But

their rugged, roguish appeal drew as much from their imperfections as from their well-formed features. By contrast, this man—this man was an ideal. Sculpted profile, light brown hair threaded with gold, and a lean, confident grace to all his movements, grand or small.

She'd observed him since the moment he entered the room. While he'd circled the assembly with a lithe, easy step; as he'd chatted with their hosts. Even when courtesy forced her to direct her eyes elsewhere, she'd been aware of him, in some tingling notch at the base of her spine. And now, this dance. His bold glances, the stolen caresses, and those devastating murmured words: *I am enraptured*. Her whole body hummed with a foreign, forbidden thrill: desire.

Oh, this was a disaster!

Bel did not want to be feeling desire. She did not want to be *feeling* anything. Any other young lady in her place might dream of just this—a divinely handsome man to sweep her away on a giddy tide of emotion.

But not her. She had come to this ball for one reason only: to select a husband from among the eligible lords. Her choice would be a wholly rational decision, made on the basis of reflection, prayer, and a well-informed portrait of the man's moral character and sphere of influence.

In aid of the process, she knew that a measure of physical attraction on the gentleman's side would be beneficial; hence, this lavish, form-fitting gown. But for her part, Bel would not be influenced by capricious flutterings of sentiment, or worse—by sinful stirrings of desire.

And it must be desire, this plague of sensation rendering her feverish and lightheaded. It certainly felt sinful. And stirring.

"You dizzy me."

The words were a whisper as the pattern shifted and the handsome gentleman wove past. Reeling from an unwelcome frisson of pleasure, Bel missed a step.

Her brother gave her a look of concern. "Come now," Gray said, guiding her back into the pattern. "Don't trust me to lead. You know I'm just learning this countrydance nonsense myself." He lowered his voice. "I don't dare cease counting under my breath, or I'll lose my place completely."

Bel gave a nervous laugh and willed her molten-wax knees to solidify. *Behave normally*, she told herself. *One, two, three. Dance, laugh, smile.*

"For God's sake, don't smile."

He'd passed behind her again, that seductive phantom, trailing his serpentine whispers that wormed in through her ears and coiled low in her belly. And here he came once more.

"When you smile, I can't breathe."

Oh dear. This was not good. Not good at all.

She knew, because *she* was good. She *was*. She was a good, good girl. Not at all the type of lady to be tempted by a golden-haired, silver-tongued devil in fitted broadcloth. Yes, she'd been raised by a

degenerate father, a lunatic mother, and two brothers who had rebuilt the family fortune through violence and theft— but Bel refused to follow that path. She'd devoted her life to ser vice and charity, although she'd grown frustrated with the limits of her good work on Tortola. Visiting the infirm, teaching children to read, even supporting the sugar cooperative— she was only sticking plasters on a rifle wound. She couldn't decrease unfair tariffs; she couldn't abolish slavery. The only people with the ability to effect meaningful change were here, in London: the lords, with their wealth and power and voices in government. Bel could not become one of them, but she could become one of the wealthy, powerful ladies at their sides.

It was a simple plan, really. She would marry a lord. She would become a lady of influence. And then she would make the world a better place. *One, two, three.* But first she must get through this dance without disgracing herself completely. The task was proving easier conceived than accomplished.

"Right," the man whispered as they crossed paths again.

Right? What did he mean, *right*? Now irritation bubbled inside her. There was nothing right about his presumptive behavior. There was most certainly nothing right about the surreptitious touch that glanced off the base of her spine—*there*. A firm brush just above her left hip that had her startling, quivering, pivoting . . . Turning to the right.

"Then left," he murmured. "Mind the feathers."

Bel turned to her left, ducking to avoid a sudden onslaught of ostrich plumes as she circled a dour- faced matron. Her mind whirled. He was helping her through the dance. It wasn't enough that he already had her intrigued, thrilled, angered, and just a little bit afraid. Now, to this stew of emotion inside her, he was adding gratitude. He was making her *like* him.

"Now back," he whispered. "Nicely done."

Oh, this just became worse and worse. They stood at rest again, and Bel felt his gaze burning over her skin. In a desperate effort to discourage him, she lifted her chin and shot the handsome stranger a haughty, quelling look.

In return, the man winked. Winked!

More distressed than ever, she averted her eyes. She should have known it wouldn't work. She had no talent what ever for haughtiness or quelling.

But she was an expert at following rules.

This dance had rules. A pattern. There was a right way to step, and a wrong way. The thought calmed her. If she adhered to the pattern, followed all the right steps, perhaps she could subdue this tempest of sensation within her— all these incon ve nient feelings stirred by a gentleman whose name she did not even know and whose fine profile she would never forget, should she live to the age of ninety- four.

Bel squared her shoulders. *I have a mission*, she reminded herself as she took her brother's hand and moved numbly through the pattern. Turning first left, then right, then releasing his hand to circle back round. *I have a purpose, a cause.*

"You have me utterly bewitched."

The words set her trembling anew. How did the man keep passing so close to her, so indecently near, without drawing attention?

Bel looked to her brother, whose forehead was wrinkled with concentration. As Gray danced, his lips moved ever so slightly. *One, two, three . . .* He was too absorbed in the pattern to notice a thing.

Perhaps she ought to flee. Would it draw a great deal of attention, if she simply turned on her heel and ran? She sighed. Of course it would. And as much as she hoped to draw society's attention, she didn't want to attract it that way. If she wanted to change the world, or even some small corner of it, these people must respect her and follow her example. Her comportment must be above reproach.

No, she could not flee. She must stay. She must follow the pattern of the dance. She must move toward this unnervingly handsome man and allow him to take her hand once again.

"Give me a word." His hand slid up to clasp her arm just below the elbow. Just above her glove. His thumb stroked her bare flesh, and Bel quivered with exquisite fear. "One word."

Together they halted in the center of the dance. His eyes held her captive, warm copper alloyed with insistent steel. His voice was low, for only her ears. "Forgive me, but there is something between us. Some force I can no better explain than resist. I am faint with it, feverish. Give me a word. Tell me you feel it, too."

Bel made a feeble attempt to retract her arm, but his grip tightened, his thumb pressing against the racing pulse in the hollow of her elbow. She couldn't think what to do. There were no more thoughts in her head, only riotous, mad sensation pounding in her blood.

"Do you? I beg of you, speak the truth."

Her eyes squeezed shut. She was a good girl. A good, good girl.

She did not lie.

"Yes."

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