

# BELLE

SCANDALS  
SECRETS  
& SPIES  
OH, MY!

REGENCY SAMPLER

**7** MUST READS  
OF THE SEASON!

WAISTLINES  
ARE *UP!*  
NECKLINES  
ARE *DOWN!*

ROGUES  
RAKES &  
GENTLEMAN:  
WHICH IS RIGHT FOR  
**YOU?**

**SABRINA JEFFRIES**

VALERIE BOWMAN

ERIN KNIGHTLEY

HEATHER SNOW

LEIGH LAVALLE

DARCY BURKE

SARA RAMSEY



# BELLE



## 'Twas the Night After Christmas

by Sabrina Jeffries

*The latest in holiday decor - an earl for your bedchamber!*

[www.SabrinaJeffries.com](http://www.SabrinaJeffries.com)

## Secrets of a Wedding Night

by Valerie Bowman

*The scandalous pamphlet that's taking London by storm!*

[www.ValerieBowmanBooks.com](http://www.ValerieBowmanBooks.com)



## To Seduce a Scoundrel

by Darcy Burke

*How to woo your man away from Fight Club...*

[www.Darcy-Burke.com](http://www.Darcy-Burke.com)

**More Than a Stranger**  
by Erin Knightley

*Is he hiding something? How to tell if  
your man is keeping secrets...*

[www.ErinKnightley.com](http://www.ErinKnightley.com)



**The Runaway Countess**  
by Leigh LaValle

*Her heart longs for justice - but her body  
clamors for sin!*

[www.LeighLaValle.com](http://www.LeighLaValle.com)

**Heiress Without a Cause**  
by Sara Ramsey

*Spinster by day, mistress by night -  
one woman's shocking story!*

[www.SaraRamsey.com](http://www.SaraRamsey.com)



**Sweet Deception**  
by Heather Snow

*What to do when you discover your  
viscount is leading a double life...*

[www.HeatherSnowBooks.com](http://www.HeatherSnowBooks.com)

# 'Twas the Night After Christmas

Sabrina Jeffries

Mrs. Camilla Stuart's cheeks heated as she gaped at Pierce Waverly, the Earl of Devonmont. How dare he refuse to join his own mother for dinner unless Camilla agree to spend her nights with him! What a despicable, wicked—

Then her brain caught up with her moral outrage. The earl wore a calculating expression, as if he knew exactly what her reaction would be.

That devil was making this up as he went along. He wanted her so insulted by his proposition that she would stop bothering him about his mother. That made far more sense than believing he actually meant it. She wasn't the sort of woman whom notorious rakehells tried to seduce.

She feigned bewilderment. "I'm afraid I don't understand, my lord. How could I possibly entertain a worldly man like you?"

His sudden black frown strengthened her supposition that his bargain was a humbug. "You know perfectly well how. After dinner is over, you and I will have our own party. Here. In my bedchamber, where you can slip in and out without being noticed. If I must spend dinner with her, then you must spend the night with *me*."

"Entertaining you," she said primly, buying time to figure out what answer would best gain her what she wanted. "Yes, I understand that part. I'm just not sure what kind of entertainment you want."

He gritted his teeth. "Oh, for the love of God, you know precisely what kind of entertainment a 'worldly man' like me wants."

Now that she'd caught on to his game, she could scarcely keep from laughing at him. He was so transparent. Why didn't all those women in London see right through him?

"On the contrary," she said blithely. "I don't know you well enough to know what you enjoy. Perhaps you would prefer me to sing for you

or dance or read you a good play. There's quite an extensive library at Montcliff. Your mother says you bought most of the books yourself. I'm sure there is some volume of—"

"I'm not talking about your reading to me!" he practically shouted.

When she merely gazed at him with an expression of innocence, he changed his demeanor. His eyes turned sultry, and a sensual smile crossed his lips. "I mean the kind of entertainment most widows prefer."

My, my, no wonder London ladies were rumored to jump into his bed. When he looked that way at a woman and spoke in that decidedly seductive voice, the average female probably melted into a puddle at his feet.

It was a good thing she was *not* an average female. In her other posts, she'd seen plenty of rakehells seducing their way through halls and balls. So even though they'd never tried their skills on her, she had a good idea how to handle such scoundrels.

This was a trickier situation, however. If she was not an average female, he was certainly not an average scoundrel.

She pretended to muse a moment. "Entertainment that widows prefer . . . Works of charity? Taking care of their families? No, those aren't actually entertaining, though they do pass the time." She cocked her head. "I confess, my lord, that you have me at a complete loss."

Uh-oh, that was probably doing it up too brown, for understanding suddenly shone in his face. "Ah, I see you are deliberately provoking me. Well, then, let me spell it out for you. You'll spend the night in my bed. Is that clear enough?"

He said it in such a peeved manner that she couldn't help but laugh. "Clear indeed, though preposterous."

His gaze narrowed on her. "How so?"

Time to let him know she had caught on to his game. "I'm aware of your reputation, sir. I'm not the sort of woman you take to bed."

Something that looked remarkably like admiration glinted in his eyes. "I thought you said you didn't know me all that well," he drawled.

"I know what kind of women you are most often seen with. By all accounts, they are tall, blowsy blondes with porcelain skin and clever hands."

He looked startled. "You *do* know my reputation."

She shrugged. "I read the papers. And your mother insists upon hearing all the stories of you, even the salacious ones."

Mention of his mother made his gaze harden. "Then you should know that men like me aren't that discriminating."

"Oh, but I'm sure you're discriminating enough not to wish to bed a short, mousy, freckled servant when there are any number of beautiful, blond actresses and opera singers awaiting you in London," she said coolly.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he dragged his gaze down her again, then circled her in a slow, careful assessment that made her nervous. A pity he wasn't a perfumed dandy; she could have handled one of those easily enough. But this sharp-witted, secretive rakehell was unpredictable.

Camilla had never liked the unpredictable.

"And what if I say that I really *am* that indiscriminate? Would you then share my bed in exchange for my dining with my mother tonight?"

She swallowed. Why did he persist in bamming her when he knew she'd caught on to him?

Well, two could play his game. "Why not? You *are* rumored to be quite good at that sort of thing, and I *have* been married." She couldn't keep the edge from her voice. "Besides, the likelihood of my ever again having the chance to be seduced by such a notorious fellow as yourself is slim."

Her frank statement made him halt, then shake his head. "Great God, Mrs. Stuart, remind me never to play cards with you. I daresay you're a terror at the gaming tables."

She bit back a smile. "I've won a hand or two at piquet in my life."

"More than a hand or two, I'd wager." He let out a long breath. "All right, then, let me propose a bargain that we could both actually adhere to. I'll do as you wish—I'll dine with you and Mother. Afterward, you will come here to join me in one of your more innocuous entertainments."

She let out a breath. She'd won! "I am happy to attempt to entertain you, my lord, if you will just give your mother a little time with you. That's all I ask."

"I'm not finished." He gazed steadily at her. "In exchange for my doing so, you must agree never again to try forcing my hand in the matter

of my mother.”

When she drew a breath as if to speak, he added more firmly, “One night of watching me and Mother together should demonstrate to you why you have no business involving yourself in our relationship. But even if it doesn’t, tomorrow must mark the end of your meddling on that point. Or I *will* dismiss you, without a qualm. Am I understood?”

She hesitated, but really, what choice did she have? “Yes, my lord.” The dratted devil was tying her hands. She’d have only one night to attempt some repair to his relationship with his mother. But it was better than she’d had before.

A heavy sigh escaped him. “I must be out of my mind to be letting you off so easily, after what you did.”

“Easily?” she said tartly. “Did you forget that I will have to entertain you this evening?”

“Ah, yes, such a trial,” he said with heavy sarcasm. “And I’ll expect rousing entertainment, too. At the very least, you must show me your reputed ability at piquet, so I can trounce you.” He stared her down. “Now that you’ve brought me here to endure this house, it’s only fair that you join me in my suffering.”

The bitter remark gave her pause. Hadn’t Lady Devonmont said that this was the original manor house on the estate? The one where he’d grown up?

As if realizing he’d revealed more than he’d meant to, he flashed her a bland smile. “It won’t be that difficult. I can be charming when I want to.”

“No doubt,” she said dryly.

“Then we’re agreed. I’ll see you here this evening after Mother has retired.”

“But you *will* come down to dinner first, sir?”

His face turned rigid. “That’s the bargain, isn’t it?”

She let out a breath. “I was just making sure.”

“Whatever else you may think of me,” he said sharply, “I do honor my promises.”

“Of course, my lord.”

She turned for the door, relief overwhelming her. She’d braved the lion’s den and survived. She’d even won a small concession. It wasn’t much,

but it might be enough to soothe the countess's hurt feelings. Spending a night "entertaining" his lordship would be no sacrifice at all, compared to that.

"One more thing, Mrs. Stuart," he said as she reached the door.

She paused to look back at him.

"You were right when you said I'm discriminating in my choice of bed partners. But you aren't remotely mousy." His gaze scoured her with a heat that didn't seem the least feigned.

Could he really mean it?

Oh, she hoped not. Because the last thing she needed in her life right now was a lover.

Only when he had her thoroughly agitated did he lower his voice to a husky drawl. "Fortunately for you, I'm not in the habit of abusing the trust of those in my employ, whether chaste maidens or experienced widows. So as long as you want me to play the respectable gentleman, I will do so."

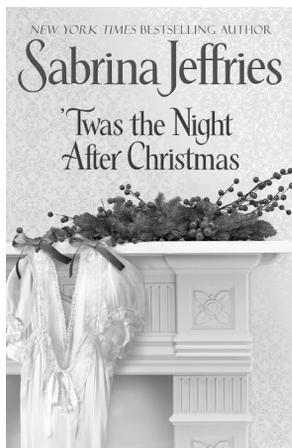
He fixed her with a smoldering look. "But let this be a warning to you. Give me an inch, and I will take two miles. If you offer more, I will be only too happy to take you into my bed."

"Then I shall have to take care not to offer more, shan't I?" And with that, she slipped from the room.

But as she made her way down the hall, her knees shaking and her hands clammy, she acknowledged that this bargain might not be quite so easy to keep. Because insane as it might be, she found the idea of being in the earl's bed rather intriguing.

\* \* \*

For the latest news and fun extras like her Will and Jane's Excellent Adventure comics, visit Sabrina at [www.SabrinaJeffries.com](http://www.SabrinaJeffries.com). You can also connect with her on Pinterest, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as download her free mobile phone app for your Android or iPhone.



## ***'Twas the Night After Christmas***

**By Sabrina Jeffries**

'Tis always the season for sexy Regency romance, and *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author Sabrina Jeffries gives readers a gift to cherish this November in the form of her first-ever gift-sized hardcover...

### ***The Letter***

*Dear Sir,*

*... I feel I should inform you that your mother is very ill. If you wish to see her before it is too late, you should come at once. Sincerely, Mrs. Camilla Stuart*

### ***The Stubborn Earl of Devonmont***

Pierce Waverly, the Earl of Devonmont, has led an unabashed rogue's life, letting no woman near his heart. Inexplicably abandoned as a child to be raised by relatives, he never forgave his parents, refusing to read his mother's letters after his father's death. Then came one that shook his resolve. A Christmas visit to Montcliff might prove his last chance to discover the truth of his past, and come to terms with the stranger he calls "mother."

### ***Mrs. Camilla Stuart and The Subterfuge***

But two surprises await him at Montcliff. His mother is nowhere near a deathbed as her meddling lady's companion led him to believe. And Camilla Stuart is a lively vicar's widow, too bright and beautiful not to arouse the scoundrel in Pierce. Though she alone is reason enough to prolong his stay, he is soon faced with other tantalizing riddles: what secrets lie in his mother's past to explain his childhood abandonment?

Why is the captivating Mrs. Stuart so determined to mend the breach between mother and son? Meanwhile, Camilla herself is caught up in love's complications since the arrival of the irresistible earl. As his bold flirtations draw her dangerously close, can anything protect her vulnerable heart? If they are destined to share real happiness, there must be honesty between them—yet telling him the truth about her own life may shatter that chance.

\* \* \*

### **Praise for the novels of Sabrina Jeffries**

“Delightful. . . . Quick pacing, witty dialogue, and charmingly original characters.” —Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“Exceptionally entertaining . . . richly imbued with steamy passion, deftly spiced with dangerous intrigue, and neatly tempered with just the right amount of tart wit.” —Booklist (starred review)

“Lively repartee, fast action, luscious sensuality, and an abundance of humor.” —Library Journal

“A grand mistress of storytelling.” —RT Book Reviews

\* \* \*

### ***'Twas the Night After Christmas***

Gallery Books Gift Hardcover

ISBN-13: 9781451642469

On sale October 30, 2012

\$19.99



# Secrets of a Wedding Night

Valerie Bowman

**London, April 1816**

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

The blows on the door echoed through the foyer. Lily heard them all the way in the study where she was poring over the dismal household accounts for the hundredth time.

“I demand to see the countess,” a deep male voice thundered.

Lily stopped scribbling. She glanced at Leopold, the scruffy brown terrier who sat curled on a worn cushion at her feet. “Demand? Good heavens.” She shook her head. “Which one of my so-called admirers is at it today?”

Returning her attention to the ledger, she mumbled, “Who knew? Apparently, twenty-two-year-old widows are all the rage this Season. That is, twenty-two-year-old widows *reportedly* worth a small fortune.”

Leopold cocked his head and barked. Lily bit her lip. “Or it could be a debt collector.”

Evans appeared in the doorway. Lily regarded her old friend with a weary sigh. “Which is it? A fortune hunter or a creditor?”

“My lady, Lord Colton is in the white salon. He insists upon seeing you.”

Lily sat up straight. “Colton?”

“The Marquis of Colton,” Evans clarified, clearing his throat.

Leopold yipped as if he recognized the name. Evans gave the dog a dubious glance indicative of the strained relationship the two had shared over the last several years.

Lily rubbed the feathered tip of her quill against her nose, her brows knitting together. “Hmm. This *is* an interesting development.”

She was grateful Evans had been awake to answer the door. Her butler had an unfortunate penchant for falling asleep at the most unexpected times. Though she suspected the racket had roused him.

Plopping the quill back into the well, she stood and smoothed her palms down her worn, gray skirts.

“Tell Lord Colton I’ll be in momentarily, Evans.” She nodded, enjoying the jolt of anticipation that leaped to life in her belly.

Devon Morgan, Marquis of Colton, in her house. Well. Of course she’d relish a distraction from the depressing house accounts, but there was something else. She’d relish the distraction from the simpering fops who’d been appearing on her doorstep smelling of too much sweet cologne and desperation. Lord Colton might be trouble, but there was nothing desperate about him.

She clapped her hands and her canine companion fell into line behind her. She and Leo whisked up the back staircase. Lily squelched the little smile that popped to her lips. Oh, yes. She knew exactly why Lord Colton was sitting in her salon. Though she hadn’t expected to see him quite so soon.

A quarter hour later, Lily made her way down the main hallway, past the tattered carpets she couldn’t afford to replace. She’d changed from the threadbare dove-gray gown into the darker morning dress she saved for company.

She drew in one last deep breath and pushed open the double doors to the white salon with both hands. She let the doors close behind her while her gaze scanned the room. It was beautifully decorated with delicate rosewood chairs, sterling silver candlesticks, and lovely antique vases filled with fresh flowers. The only room in the house so well appointed. Another concession to appearances.

Lily squared her shoulders. The confident smile she had pasted on her face belied the nervous knot of anticipation that roiled through her belly. She folded her hands serenely—a trick her mother taught her long ago—and made her way into the room.

Lord Colton sat in an embroidered chair, facing the window, his profile to her. He’d turned his head at the sound of her entrance. His countenance was a study in barely controlled anger. But years of breeding

could not be denied. He rose to greet her.

Lily sucked in her breath. My, my, she hadn't seen the Marquis of Colton up close in an age. He'd always been handsome—how could she forget?—but she had failed to remember him being quite *this* good-looking.

He stood easily two inches over six feet tall, with slightly curly, raven-black hair. He had chiseled cheekbones and a perfectly sculpted mouth that could linger in one's memory, if one were interested in such things, which Lily decidedly was *not*. But most intriguing of all were his eyes. Deep, dark, and coffee brown, they shone with an off-putting intelligence and were framed by thick, long lashes that held an appeal all their own.

Lily pressed her lips together. Oh, yes, the Marquis of Colton was tall, dark, and handsome. Too much of all three for Lily's peace of mind.

She swept toward him, meeting his eyes, and his anger seemed to diffuse a bit. His shoulders settled and his stance became less rigid.

"Lord Colton." She curtsied and her dark skirts pooled around her ankles. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? I haven't seen you in—what's it been—three years? Four?"

Leopold trotted past—affording Lord Colton with a distinctive growl indicative of the strained relationship *they* had shared in the past—before taking up residence on his favorite cushion in the corner.

Lily hid her smile and offered her hand to the marquis.

When he touched her small, cold fingers with his strong, warm ones, a frisson of awareness skittered up Lily's spine. He bowed. There was that breeding again.

"Four years, perhaps," he answered. "And whether or not this visit is pleasurable remains to be seen, my lady."

Pulling her hand away from his unsettling touch, Lily crossed her arms over her chest and drummed her fingertips along her elbows. It had been nearly five years and he knew it.

They both knew it.

His voice seemed to seek out some sensitive place along her nerves and thrum a thrilling tune. Deep, masculine, and oh-so-powerful was Lord Colton's voice. And confident. She mustn't forget confident.

"How did you find me, my lord? Seems the last time you were

expected to pay me a visit, you lost your way.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “It was quite simple, really. I merely followed the trail of men to your door. Rumor has it your butler has had to beat away your suitors with a stick. When he can stay awake, that is.”

Lily gritted her teeth. “It’s indelicate of you to mention Evan’s unfortunate condition, but I suppose I should expect no more of you. I also employ a maid who cannot remember her name from one moment to the next. Not all households can be as *illustrious* as yours, now can they?”

His only reply was a smirk. So much for that good breeding.

“But now that I think upon it, it is a fine idea,” Lily continued. “I shall have to tell Evans to fetch a stick. It’s unfortunate he didn’t have one before *you* arrived.”

Leopold’s ears perked and Lily shook her head, assuring the dog there was, in fact, no stick to be had. He slumped back onto his cushion and closed his eyes.

Lord Colton’s smile was tight. “I am not a suitor, and I assure you, your butler would need more than a stick to keep me from my mission today.”

“Mission? My, it sounds dire. Do tell me, what brings you here this afternoon?”

He waited for her to sit first, of course, before taking his place in the chair across from her. His size made the piece look like doll furniture. Her gaze traveled from the tip of his black Hessians up his long legs stretched in front of him, encased in biscuit-colored trousers. Her eyes lingered on his narrow hips and broad shoulders, before moving up to the decidedly irritated look on his perfect face.

*Confound it.* The man looked even better than he had five years ago. Five *long* years ago.

“I’m here to discuss a certain pamphlet that has been circulating in the company of young, unmarried females. A pamphlet entitled *Secrets of a Wedding Night*.”

Lily kept her face blank. “Hmm. *Secrets of a Wedding Night*. Yes, I’ve heard rumors of that scandalous bit of writing.”

Colton crossed his long legs at the ankles. “I assume you have also heard, then, my lady, that you are widely rumored to be the author of that

particular piece.”

She kept her eyes downcast and dropped only one costly lump of sugar into her teacup. She stirred slowly, set the tiny silver spoon aside, and raised her chin to stare him in the eye.

“Me?” she asked in a falsely shocked voice.

“Yes, everyone knows you and Viscount Medford are thick as thieves. He’s been known to publish that sort of drivel.”

“Keeping track of my friendships, are you, my lord?”

“Only when it affects me, my lady.”

She clucked her tongue. “Ghastly thing, gossip.”

“Well?” His voice held an edge.

This called for an innocent look, and Lily just so happened to have perfected an innocent look. “What are you asking, my lord?” Positively saintly.

“Did. You. Write. It?” He sounded like a man who was used to having his questions answered the first time.

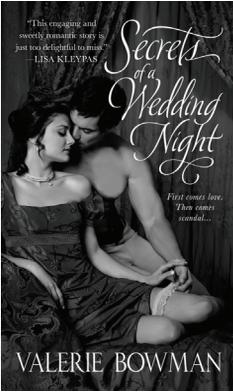
Lily raised her cup to her lips, hiding her expression behind it, watching him. Why, the cad was nearly shouting at her. Did she write the pamphlet? Of course she wrote it, and she happened to be exceedingly proud of it. But she couldn’t very well admit it and still maintain her place in Polite Society. And she needed her place in Society, for Annie’s sake.

Another sip of tea. “If I wrote it—and I am not saying I did—I stand behind its contents. Young ladies should know exactly what they’re getting into, after all. That pamphlet provides a much-needed service to the uninformed.”

He clenched his jaw and leaned toward her, bracing his forearms on his knees. His maddeningly masculine scent found her nostrils, a mixture of horse leather, the barest hint of expensive cologne, and something indefinable. Probably that blasted confidence.

His voice was silky, yet menacing, and held a promising tone that made it seem hot in the room again. “That pamphlet is a pack of lies told by a woman who hasn’t been bedded properly, a situation I can easily remedy.”

Lily gasped.



## *Secrets of a Wedding Night* - A Secret Brides Novel

**First comes love, Then comes scandal . . .**

### *How to Stop a Wedding*

Young, widowed, and penniless, Lily Andrews, the Countess of Merrill, has strong opinions on marriage. When she spots a certain engagement announcement in *The Times*, she decides to take action. She will not allow another hapless girl to fall prey to a man—particularly the scoundrel who broke her heart five years ago. Anonymously she writes and distributes a pamphlet entitled “*Secrets of a Wedding Night*,” knowing it will find its way into his intended’s innocent hands...

### *How to Seduce a Widow*

Devon Morgan, the Marquis of Colton, desires a good wife and mother to his son— someone completely unlike Lily Andrews, the heartless beauty who led him on a merry chase five years ago only to reject him. When Devon’s new fiancée cries off after reading a certain scandalous pamphlet, he vows to track down the author and make her pay. But when he learns it’s his former fiancée Lily, he issues a challenge: write a retraction or prepare to be seduced—to find out how wonderful a wedding night can be...

---

“The most charming and clever debut I’ve read in years!”

— *New York Times* bestselling author Lisa Kleypas

“Clever, fun and fantastic!” — *New York Times* bestselling author Suzanne Enoch

***Secrets of a Wedding Night* was a 2011 Golden Heart Regency finalist!**

Publisher: St. Martin’s Press | ISBN: 1250008956

Release Date: September 25, 2012 | Price of Book: \$7.99

Learn more about ***Secrets of a Wedding Night***, the first novel in the Secret Brides trilogy, and sign up for Valerie’s free newsletter at **[www.ValerieBowmanBooks.com](http://www.ValerieBowmanBooks.com)**.

# *To Seduce a Scoundrel*

Darcy Burke

*London, April 1818*

From the comfort of the Herrick coach, Lady Philippa Latham watched her mother alight from Mr. Booth-Barrows' carriage in front of a massive neo-classical house on Saville Street. Booth-Barrows tucked Mother's hand over his arm and they climbed the steps of the townhouse, their heads bent close together. *Like lovers*. Philippa seethed. Loveless marriage or no, how dare Mother openly cuckold Father? And only days after she'd informed Philippa she must marry this season. How was she to accomplish that while her mother was cavorting about town with a man who wasn't her husband?

Philippa clasped her fingers tightly around the door handle, and before she knew her own mind, she was stepping from the coach. The footman leaped to help her.

With murmured appreciation and a directive to wait until she returned, she dashed across the moonlit street. Nervous energy propelled her along her mother's path. Philippa had never done anything so rash before, but she was intent on convincing Mother to come home immediately.

A black and silver liveried footman opened the front door, and Philippa stepped into a cavernous marble entry. But instead of her mother, other guests, or some sort of receiving line, she found emptiness punctuated by the gentle swell of conversation and muted laughter coming from a chamber on the opposite side of the foyer.

"Would you care for a cloak?"

Philippa turned toward a second footman who held up a voluminous black cloak, complete with a large hood. She frowned. Why on earth would she want to wear a cloak inside? "No, thank you." Puzzled, she turned from the footman and squared her shoulders.

Head high, she strode across the gleaming marble and did her best to appear as if she belonged, though she'd no idea whose house she'd invaded. Not that she cared, so long as she found her mother and took her home. While it was true some women had liaisons outside of their marriage, her mother shouldn't be one of them. Not after twenty-two years of insisting upon propriety and respectability above all else. Philippa's outrage bubbled anew.

She paused at the threshold to the large, dimly lit room beyond the foyer. It was crowded with people. *Masked people*. Faint tendrils of trepidation curled in her chest.

She stepped into the room, seeking her mother's peacock blue gown. In the center, a woman stood on a table in nothing but her chemise and garters. Philippa gaped, completely unprepared for such a shocking display.

She spun about, clenching her teeth. *Curse her impulsivity*, which she rarely indulged. How fitting that on her first foray she'd stumbled into precisely the impropriety her mother had warned against. And how ironic that she'd done so in pursuit of Mother.

A man clasped her elbow. "Lady Philippa." The whisper came next to her ear and sent a shiver down her neck.

Philippa jumped. She turned her head to look at the man, but a dark mask covered the upper half of his face. Panic rooted in her belly. "How do you know who I am?"

He dragged her to the side of the room, deeper into the shadows, and pressed her against the wall. The edge of the wainscoting dug into her lower back. Then he stepped close. Too close. He put his hands up behind his head. "Quickly, take my mask." He worked another moment then muttered, "Bloody hell, the tie is knotted."

She didn't know what sort of event she'd stumbled into, but clearly it was wicked, and the only thing standing between her and certain ruin was—literally—this bold stranger. Right now, she'd take this man's audacity over discovery.

"Let me." She stood on her toes, for he was quite tall, and found the knot at the back of his head. He smelled of rosemary and sandalwood, very pleasant.

"Where'd she go?" a male voice behind her rescuer asked. "I saw the

loveliest creature, dark hair, pale gown—no mask, if you can imagine. She was just here.”

Her rescuer leaned his head down so that their mouths were a breath apart. If she nudged up the slightest bit, their lips would touch... Her fingers fumbled as she tried to work the knot free.

“Eh, there she is, against the wall.”

Philippa gave up her struggle with the mask and moved her hands to her rescuer’s lapels. She pulled him closer so that her bodice grazed the front of his coat. “Don’t you dare move.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he murmured, his warm breath caressing her mouth.

More shivers. This time dancing down her arms.

He clasped her waist and she would’ve jumped back if the wall behind her had allowed any such movement. “I ought to convince the men behind me you are engaged, ah, with me. Pardon my familiarity, but I do believe kissing you is necessary. You might take the opportunity to continue working at the ties of my mask.”

Before she had time to make sense of anything he’d just told her, his lips met hers.

The pressure of his mouth was warm and soft. She’d been kissed before—a swift brushing of lips that had left her curious—but pressed against a stranger in a dark corner, this was something quite different. Somehow more than just a kiss. A moment later his advice sunk into her befuddled thoughts. *The mask.*

She lifted her arms, which only served to bring her body up against him rather snugly. His chest pressed against hers in a terribly intimate fashion, while he moved his lips slowly, sensuously over hers. Her sensibilities were scandalized, but her body didn’t care. Her flesh heated, and little whorls of excitement replaced the panic in her belly.

A dissatisfied grunt came from behind her rescuer, followed by, “Someone else got to her first.” Two sets of footsteps trailed away.

She plucked at the ties of the mask, and at last it came loose. He broke the kiss and caught the mask before it fell. Then he turned it around and covered the upper two-thirds of her face. He quickly tied the thin strands around the back of her head. The mask was too large for her, but

that only meant it covered more and she wouldn't complain about *that*. Not when there were plenty of other things to worry about.

Such as how disappointed she felt that their kiss was over. Ludicrous! She needed to concentrate on getting out of there without being identified. "You recognized me immediately. I suppose it's too much to hope no one else did." She tested the knot at the back of her head and was satisfied it wouldn't come loose even as she feared it didn't matter. Though the other men hadn't referred to her by name, her heretofore pristine reputation would be ruined if any of them had discerned her identity.

"You aren't sure if anyone saw you?" The dark timbre of his voice wrapped around her.

The mask tunneled her vision, and even squinting she couldn't make out his features in the shadowed corner they inhabited. "Just the footmen. One of them offered me a cloak. Oh dear, was that to shield my identity? How was I to know?"

"What were you expecting to find at Lockwood House?" His tone carried a hint of sarcasm.

"*Lockwood House?*" Dear Lord, she'd marched through the gates of Hell and straight into Lucifer's bedchamber. "Is this one of those...parties?" She wasn't even sure what those 'parties' were—proper girls like her never would—but she'd heard enough to know that being caught attending one would mean the death of her reputation.

She reined in her shock to indulge her rising panic. "I have to get out of here. Now."

"I agree." He took her elbow and turned her toward the door.

They took two steps and then stopped short as a group of people stepped inside. He drew her around and guided her along the perimeter of the room. "Sorry, I'd rather not go out that way, particularly since I'm now without a mask."

"I'm sorry to have taken yours. It was very kind of you to offer it, Mr...?"

"Sevrin."

She stumbled as the full reality of her situation permeated her panicked

brain. “*Lord Sevrin.*” She sounded breathless, but the implications to her reputation were disastrous. And perhaps irreversible.

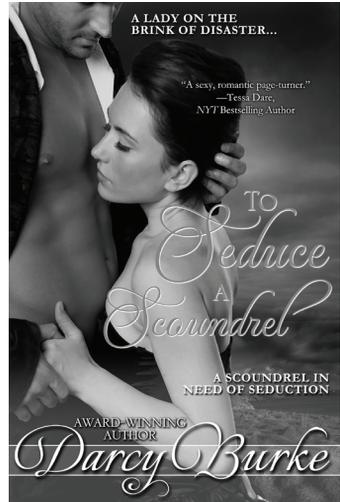
He clasped her waist to steady her. “As usual, I see my reputation has preceded me.”

\* \* \*

## To Seduce A Scoundrel

*A lady on the brink of disaster, a scoundrel in need of seduction...*

When debutante Lady Philippa finds herself in a potentially compromising situation, she’s “rescued” by England’s most notorious scoundrel, Lord Ambrose Sevrin. Despite his scandalous past, Ambrose vows to preserve Philippa’s reputation, but instead launches them both on a path to public and personal ruin.

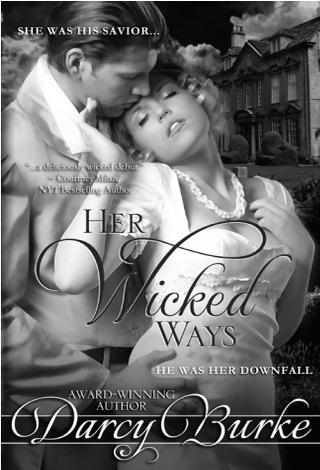


“Darcy Burke pulls no punches with this sexy, romantic page-turner. Sevrin and Philippa’s story grabs you from the first scene and doesn’t let go. *To Seduce a Scoundrel* is simply delicious!”

—Tessa Dare, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

ISBN: 0615639534 | Intrepid Reads | July 2012

A native Oregonian, Darcy lives on the edge of wine country with her devoted husband, their two great kids, and three cats. Sign up for Darcy’s newsletter at <http://www.darcy-burke.com>, follow her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/darcyburke>, and like her Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/darcyburkefans>.



## HER *Wicked* WAYS

Available Now

To save his orphanage from collapse, Montgomery Foxcroft leads a double life as a highwayman. Banished debutante Lady Miranda is his salvation—until she rejects him. Out of options and falling for the heiress, Fox must risk what principles he has left and take advantage of her wicked ways—even if it ruins them both.

“A bad girl heroine steals both the show and a highwayman’s heart in Darcy Burke’s deliciously wicked debut.”

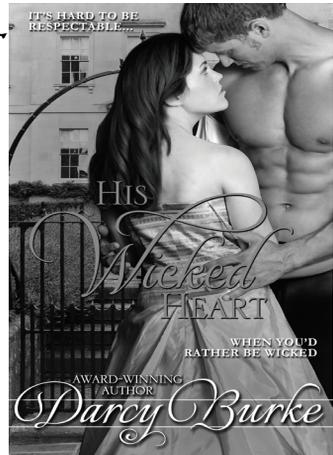
—Courtney Milan, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

ISBN: 0615631347 | Intrepid Reads | Available Now

## HIS *Wicked* HEART

Available Now

Jasper Sinclair, Earl of Saxton, made a bargain with his devil of a father to marry a proper deb. Instead, he becomes entangled with a sometimes actress, Olivia West, determined to improve her situation. Destitute and desperate, she agrees to one night with Jasper, hatching a scheme to take his money and keep her virtue. However, Jasper uncovers her deception and vows to claim what he’s owed.



“Intense and intriguing. Cinderella meets *Fight Club* in a historical romance packed with passion, action and secrets.”

—Anna Campbell, *Seven Nights in a Rogue’s Bed*

ISBN: 0615647367 | Intrepid Reads | Available Now

# More Than a Stranger

Erin Knightley

“Oof!”

The air was knocked right from her lungs as Evie collided at full speed with an unmoving brick wall that she knew for a fact should not be there. She stumbled, almost falling backward when a pair of large strong hands grasped her upper arms and steadied her.

“I beg your pardon. Are you quite all right?”

The brick wall spoke surprisingly good English for an inanimate object.

Evie’s gaze traveled up the dark gray greatcoat, past the sharp, lightly stubbled jaw, and settled briefly on a very inviting set of masculine lips before reaching the man’s dark, velvet brown eyes. Words failed her completely. *Where* had this gorgeous man come from? For endless seconds she stood stock-still, held not only in his grasp, but in his curious gaze as well. He had the loveliest eyes she had ever seen, like the burnished mahogany of her father’s heirloom desk.

“Miss? Are you injured?”

Evie blinked. She should say something. She should *really* say something. “Um. . . quite.”

His dark eyebrows scrunched together as he tilted his head slightly. “Quite . . . injured?”

“No! Quite all right. I’m fine, really. Um, thank you.” Oh Lord, why must she lose her wits, now of all times? Here, now, with a gorgeous stranger very nearly holding her in his arms? She finally understood what it meant to be struck dumb by something, and at the worst possible time.

And now he was looking at her as if she was one horse short of a matched pair. “You’re certain?”

Evie almost laughed. Was she certain? Not in the slightest. She felt as though she had just been spun around in circles, but there was no way she would tell him as much. She took a quick step back, pulling away from his steadying hands. It was far enough to miss his warmth, but at least she could still detect the subtle, enticing hint of leather and sandalwood. She took a slow breath and offered him a smile. “Yes, I’m certain. Please accept my apologies for not watching where I was going, Mr. . . .?”

“Evie!”

Evie jumped, whirling around at the unexpected voice from behind her. “Richard! What on earth are you doing here?”

She wouldn’t have been more surprised if Prinny himself had been standing in her stables. Joy swooped through her, and she opened her arms to her brother. Grinning, he came forward and scooped her up in a bear hug. When he released her, Evie looked him over, taking in his tousled blond hair and wind-reddened cheeks.

“Well, it’s good to see you, too, Little Bit. Are you headed out for a ride?”

“Yes, I was before I ran into our visitor. A friend of yours, I presume?” She motioned toward the stranger but froze when their eyes met. He was watching her with such intensity, she instinctively took a tiny step back. The look was gone in an instant. Evie blinked in confusion. How completely odd. Could she have possibly imagined the fierceness of his gaze? Surely she had—she had only just met the man! He’d have no cause to care one way or another about her. Nonetheless, a tiny shiver raced down her spine.

A chuckle drew her attention back to Richard. He flashed a broad, cheeky grin her way, shaking his head slowly. “I can’t believe I haven’t introduced the two of you yet.”

Evie raised an eyebrow. He was up to something.

She cut her eyes toward the other man. She did *not* want to embarrass herself in front of him any more than she already had. Fortunately, he paid her no mind at all. The whole of his attention was focused sharply on Richard.

For some reason, her brother seemed to enjoy the moment. With his usual flare for dramatics, he said, “My dear Evie, it is my great pleasure to

introduce you to my friend, the venerated, the enigmatic, the long-aw—”

And at that moment the stranger stepped forward.

\* \* \*

One second, Benedict’s brain had been frozen from the shock of discovering that the incredibly beautiful blond goddess before him was, in fact, Evie. *His* Evie. The Evie who was *supposed* to be in London, far away from the house he sought refuge in.

The next thing he knew, he was jerking into action, opening his mouth without a clue about what he would say, only suddenly very sure that Evie could not know he was Hastings. “Mr. James Benedict, at your service, my lady.”

The lie was like vinegar in his mouth, and he gritted his teeth with the effort to keep his expression neutral. God, what had he done? His gaze shot to Richard, who stood just to the right of his sister. At any other time, his face would have been comical. Not then. No, at that moment, Benedict could do nothing but pray his old friend wouldn’t call him out right then and there.

Blessedly oblivious to the silent battle between the men, Evie grinned. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Benedict. And thank you for speaking up; my brother does tend to like to hear himself speak.” She bumped Richard with her shoulder teasingly. Thank God she didn’t look to his face. With his mouth frozen open and his eyes akin to those of a startled owl, she would have known in an instant something was not right.

Benedict met Richard’s gaze straight on, willing him to go along with the ruse. The damned lie had just come out, as natural as taking a breath of air. Really, what the hell else could Benedict have done? Bits and pieces of that dreadful last letter came rushing back to him. If she knew who he was, she would probably eviscerate him—with words, if he were lucky, though he deserved worse.

Damn it all, he had too much to handle as it was; adding in an irate ghost from his past would make the situation unbearable.

Loosening the muscles of his jaw, he offered her his best impersonation of a lighthearted smile. “Yes, I was beginning to wonder if he’d simply forgotten who I was.”

Richard's mouth snapped shut then, and he gave Benedict a considering look. "No," he said slowly, "I for one, have not forgotten who you are, *Mister Benedict*."

The emphasis was subtle, but unmistakable. Still, Benedict's galloping pulse slowed a little. Richard would go along with him—for now, at least. Even as he tried to concentrate on the farce in front of him, Benedict's mind raced to think of an explanation for when he and Richard were next alone. Whatever it was, it had to be damned good.

"Well, allow me to welcome you to Hertford Hall." Evie gave a small flick of her wrist, encompassing the whole of the house and grounds past the stable door. Obediently, Benedict wrenched his gaze from her attractive form and surveyed the scenery as any normal guest would. It truly was impressive—even more so than his own family's estate in Leicestershire. With the massive stone facade rising from the gently sloping hill, it had the effect of somehow presiding over the neatly manicured lawns and rolling forestland beyond. There was no mistaking the pride the family took in the place.

"Thank you, my lady. It is a pleasure to finally see the place for myself." He could have bitten his tongue. *Finally?*

Her hand went to her trim waist, which was nicely emphasized by the cut of her light blue riding habit. "I hadn't realized you'd been acquainted so very long. How is it that you and my brother know each other, Mr. Benedict?"

A very good question. Beside her, Richard crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side, the first hint of amusement coloring his expression. With both siblings waiting expectantly, Benedict decided to go with the most obvious answer. "Eton, actually. We met in the early days."

As a person who spent half his time living a lie, he knew it was best to stick as close to the truth as possible.

"When was it, exactly?" Richard asked, the very picture of innocence. "I can't seem to remember."

Oh yes. Clearly he was starting to enjoy himself.

Benedict opened his mouth to respond, but the distant thunder of an approaching horse gave him pause. Whoever it was, he had Benedict's

undying gratitude. He turned in time to see a lone rider on a very handsome red mount rapidly approaching. Though the man sported gray hair to Richard's blond and a slightly stockier build, the resemblance was impossible to miss. "Richard, is that your father?"

"Indeed it is," he responded, waving hugely at the older man. The marquis returned the gesture, and the siblings hurried forward to greet him.

Benedict hung back, glad for a second to try to gather his wits. Granville had no idea how indebted Benedict was to him for his timely—and inadvertent—rescue. He took a long, slow pull of air, trying to calm his overworked nerves.

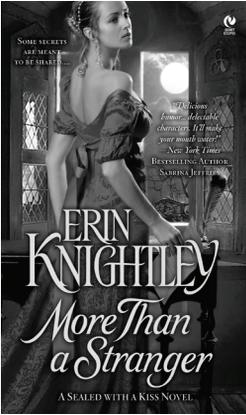
After all these years—after all those letters—it was nothing short of shocking to see Evie in the flesh. To hear her smooth, clear voice and fleetingly feel her lithe body pressed against his.

Even toward the end, when she had invaded both his thoughts and his dreams as an ethereal, indistinct beauty, he could have never imagined how lovely she would be in person. All those emotions he had pushed into the far recesses of his mind almost a decade earlier now roared through his body, heating his blood. Her luminous, nearly crystalline blue eyes, her open yet somehow enticing smile—even her slightly tanned skin added to her allure. It was as though the forbidden fruit had been placed before him, perfect in all its untouchable glory.

Benedict swallowed, cursing his wretched luck.

\* \* \*

*Despite being an avid reader and closet writer her whole life, Erin Knightley decided to pursue a sensible career in science. It was only after earning her B.S. and working in the field for years that she realized doing the sensible thing wasn't any fun at all. Following her dreams, Erin left her practical side behind and now spends her days writing. Together with her tall, dark, and handsome husband and their three spoiled mutts, she is living her own Happily Ever After in North Carolina.*



## *More Than a Stranger*

A Sealed With a Kiss Novel

### AN UNCOVERED BETRAYAL

When his family abandoned him at Eton, Benedict Hastings found an unexpected ally in his best friend's sister. Her letters kept him going—until the day he had to leave everything behind. Years later, Benedict has seen his share of betrayal, but when treachery hits close to home, he turns to his old friend for safe haven....

### AN UNWANTED ATTRACTION

After five torturous years on the marriage circuit, Lady Evelyn Moore is finally free to live her life as she wishes. So when her brother shows up with a dashing stranger, she finds herself torn between her dreams...and newfound desires.

### AN UNSTOPPABLE INTRIGUE

Despite his determination to keep Evie at a distance, Benedict cannot deny the attraction that began with a secret correspondence. Yet as they begin to discover one another, the dangers of Benedict's world find them, threatening their lives, their love, and everything they thought they could never have...

Publisher: NAL Signet Eclipse | ISBN: 0451237714

Release Date: June 5th, 2012 | Price: \$7.99

*Coming December, 2012:*

*Book Two in the Sealed With a Kiss Series:*

*A Taste for Scandal*

[www.ErinKnightley.com](http://www.ErinKnightley.com)

Twitter: @ErinKnightley

[www.Facebook.com/ErinKnightley](http://www.Facebook.com/ErinKnightley)

Scan code for blurbs, excerpts, & more!



# *The Runaway Countess*

Leigh LaValle

*“Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.” Shakespeare*

*Nottinghamshire, June, 1821*

It wasn't as if she enjoyed stealing from people. It wasn't as if she took some private pleasure in punishing them. In a world of her design there would be no need for retribution. But it was a capricious world with no judicious captain at the fore, and she could but hold fast to her convictions.

Mazie Chetwyn pressed her forehead against the sole window in her garret prison. She hardly noticed the relief of cool glass against heated skin. Her every thought was centered on the man galloping up the drive, his greatcoat billowing out behind him and his hat tilted against the afternoon downpour. She could not see his face, did not recognize him by horse or style. She knew him by his fury. He rode as if the hounds of hell were slaving at his heels.

Lord Radford had finally come.

Furious as the pelting rain, he galloped past the towering oaks, past the rows of tulips and past the fountain. Mazie's heart hammered in her chest with the same urgency as the pounding hooves.

It was done, then. Her captor was here.

Radford pulled his mount to a stop in front of the wide marble steps and jumped down. Mazie flattened her bruised cheek against the chilled windowpane and watched him toss the reins to a footman then refuse the umbrella, his arms sweeping this way and that. What was he saying? Her attic window remained stubbornly closed.

Then he disappeared into the house.

Her heart stopped—everything froze—then resumed again with a

firmer stroke and beat. Would he come up here, to her garret prison? Would he rant and rave as Harrington had? Would he hit her as Harrington had?

She paced away from the window and combed her hair with trembling fingers. Radford was dangerous and beyond the reach of the law. To him, she was a nobody, an expendable inconvenience. He would get what he wanted from her, then send her to London to be hanged, proof that he was a great Lord Lieutenant.

But there was still hope. There was always hope.

She hastily braided her dark hair and looked around the room for... anything. A weapon, a prop, a diversion. There was nothing. The room was bare save a dresser with a washing bowl and a small nub of a candle, a narrow bed, a scarred desk and a chair in front of a cold fireplace.

A man's voice rumbled through the wood floor like distant thunder and sent ripples of fear through her belly. He was coming up the servants' stairs, biting out something about weapons and horses and lists. A space of quiet followed, and she pressed her ear to the door. Someone must have replied, and now he was on again about riding out in the morning. He would gather a militia, then. Search for Roane with an untried gathering of men, each one eager to shoot the famed highwayman and collect the reward.

Radford's footsteps were heavier now, echoing down the hallway outside her door. He wasted no time in coming to see her. She rushed to the chair, grasped her shaking hands together in her lap and cast her gaze to the floor.

Meek. She would play meek.

She would absorb all his barbed anger and give him nothing to fight against. She would be honey and molasses, everything sweet and slow.

A lock scraped open and Radford filled the doorway, all broad shoulders and dark mood. He brought the mud and rain with him on his clothes.

From the corner of her vision, Mazie watched him step into her room and close the door. He studied her for a long moment. "Miss Mazie, I presume."

She let her feet shift nervously on the floor but did not move her eyes. "Yes, my lord."

He walked closer. His muddied boots reached up to his knees and gave way to powerful thighs. He was strong, of a physical nature. "I've been dragged all the way from London for this unfortunate bit of business." Low and firm, his voice played across her nerves like drums before a battle. "My magistrate Harrington tells me you have refused to assist our investigation into the Midnight Rider."

She lifted her chin and looked up at him, let her expression be round and guileless. She was everything worried and intimidated.

His frown cut deep grooves into his otherwise handsome face. The years had changed him, enough that she wouldn't have recognized him passing by on the street. Gone was the distracted young man she remembered, replaced by sharp angles, dark hollows and glittering grey eyes entirely too piercing for her comfort. His damp hair—almost black in the wan light—let go of a drop of rain. He swiped it away with a rough hand. "It is unfortunate that your reticence is my inconvenience, Miss Mazie."

He had come to drag the information from her. Of course he had. She had to wonder at the tactics he would use, how far he would push. She slumped in her chair, giving the impression that he need not try hard at all. "I do not wish to be difficult, my lord."

He circled her chair and his muddy boots brushed her skirts. It did not matter. Her dress had been ruined days ago.

"The highwayman will be hanged for acts of treason." He stopped behind her, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She should have known better than to leave the chair in the middle of the room. "You do understand the danger you are in?"

"Yes." She whispered the word. It was not hard to fake her fear.

Radford did not say anything more. He would wait to see what she did next, give her space to expose something about herself.

She played into his hands. Stood, as if uncomfortable with him behind her—which she was—and smoothed her sweating palms over her coarse black skirts.

He reached across the chair. "What's this?"

Touch. He was touching her face. Rage jolted to her fingertips. She almost betrayed herself by lashing out. *Not now, Mazie. Wait.* Digging her fingernails into her palms, she let him turn her face to the window and

examine the bruise on her cheek and cut on her lip.

“Who hit you?” he demanded.

She did not reply. She wouldn't be able to say anything without revealing the depth of her fury. Harrington would pay for his cruelty, not only to her but to others in the village. For now, she concentrated on being fluid like melting snow, and not the blaze of fire she wanted to be.

Radford's grey eyes scrutinized her. The hot stroke of his attention was everywhere on her skin, from her face down to her bare feet. She would not let herself worry. He would not recognize her. Placing her in that very different context—the context of her past life—would make matters even worse. She would push the thought aside.

She shifted her gaze to the slide of raindrops down the windowpane. Radford smelled of the rain, she noticed. The out-of-doors clung to his skin, as did the sweet scent of wet horse and wet wool. And something else, the musk only a man has after a day of physical exertion.

“You have the look of a Frenchwoman.” Still, he touched her. Held her face in his hand. “Where are you from?”

“I was born in England.” She modulated her words to be perfect, sloppy English. Nothing of her maman and her delicious French accent remained.

Finally, he let go of her chin. He paced to the door and she thought he might leave, but he simply opened it and instructed the footman to go to the kitchens and fetch a salve for her cut.

That, she had not expected.

Whether it was a kindness or a strategy on his part, she did not care. His misjudgment would be her gain. In three days, never had her door been without an armed guard. Radford exposed himself in a dangerous way—one she would take advantage of.

He turned back to her, his face set in hard edges—square jaw, sharp cheekbones and slash of brow. Yes, he looked different than she remembered. His handsomeness had power behind it now. “My dear woman, you will fare much worse in prison. Tell me what I want to know and perhaps I could be persuaded to view your crimes with leniency.”

“I-I,” *Meek, Mazie. Softer.* She lowered her voice. “I would like to assist your investigation, my lord.”

“A wise choice. I am glad we shall play this out the easy way.” He leaned back against the wall, his eyes narrowed on her. She knew what he was thinking, his wariness spoke volumes. Harrington would have told him she was a hellion, “all spit and fire” he’d called her. And she was. That Radford watched her with such consideration heartened her. She must be playing her role well.

“The hard way is much more unpleasant,” he warned.

“I regret my earlier defiance against Mr. Harrington, and I...I thank you for offering me protection. He explained it was your choice to hold me here rather than at Radford gaol.” She wrapped her arms around her waist and hunched her shoulders. Inside, she was fair to bursting with anticipation.

She had but one chance. She must play it out to perfection.

\* \* \*

### **Praise for *The Runaway Countess***

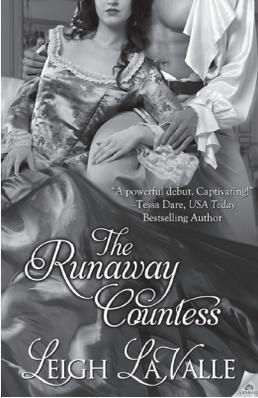
“A powerful debut. Leigh LaValle is a captivating new voice in historical romance.” Tessa Dare, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

“THE RUNAWAY COUNTESS is an enchanting debut, full of passion, angst, danger, and the promise of true love.” Courtney Milan, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

“LaValle’s debut is exciting and action packed, with a hero and heroine who play well off each other.” 4 stars, RT Book Reviews

“The characters are, indeed, so empathetic...that you honestly feel like you are watching your two best friends fall in love.” TOP PICK, Night Owl Reviews

The Runaway Countess was a 2011 Golden Heart Historical finalist!



## ***The Runaway Countess* - available now A Naughty in Nottinghamshire novel**

*Her heart longs for justice, but her body clamors for sin.*

Once the darling of high society, Mazie Chetwyn knows firsthand how quickly the rich and powerful turn their backs on the less fortunate. Orphaned, penniless and determined to defy their ruthless whims, she joins forces with a local highwayman who steals from the rich to give to the poor.

Then the pawn broker snitches, and Mazie is captured by the Lord Lieutenant of Nottinghamshire. A man who is far too handsome, far too observant...and surely as corrupt as his father once was.

Sensible, rule-driven Trent Carthwick, twelfth Earl of Radford, is certain the threat of the gallows will prompt the villagers' beloved Angel of Kindness to reveal the highwayman's identity. But his bewitching captive volunteers nothing—except a sultry, bewildering kiss.

And so the games begin. Trent feints, Mazie parries. He threatens, she pretends nonchalance. He cajoles, she rebuffs. Thwarted at every turn, Trent probes deep into her one vulnerability—her past. There he finds the leverage he needs and a searing truth that challenges all he believes about right and wrong.

\* \* \*

Leigh LaValle lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family. When she is not writing, mommying, or reading, she is rarely seen cleaning, and more often found hiking or, when she is really lucky, in the white powder of the ski slopes. Leigh is also a devoted yoga practitioner and instructor. Learn more at [www.LeighLaValle.com](http://www.LeighLaValle.com).

Look for the next two Naughty in Nottinghamshire stories:  
*The Misbehaving Marquess* and *The Rogue Returns*

# Heiress Without a Cause

Sara Ramsey

Ferguson, the new Duke of Rothwell, had looked notorious the night before, striding through her aunt's ballroom with his devil-may-care smile.

Tonight, dressed in stark black and holding her against him, he looked *powerful* and notorious. His icy blue eyes saw straight through her makeup and his sculpted jaw clenched as he looked her over.

But where a gentleman would have apologized profusely to a lady of her birth and set her on her feet, he kept his grip on her arms. "Madame Guerrier, it was an honor to see you perform."

His silky voice stole her breath away. He hadn't recognized her — unless he was toying with her. "*Merci*, your grace," she said, keeping her voice low and heightening the French accent she used at the theatre.

He arched a single brow. "I did not know we were acquainted. Surely I would remember being introduced to one such as you."

It was a fatal slip. If she was the actress she claimed to be, she would never have seen him before. "Of course not, your grace. Madame Legrand said a red-haired duke was in attendance. I merely guessed you to be the duke."

He still looked at her with those disturbingly perceptive eyes. "I do hope I haven't inconvenienced you, but I must ask you a question of a rather... delicate nature. Shall I accompany you to your carriage?"

This was the second time in twenty-four hours that he wanted to ask her a question, but she had no illusions this time. He knew who she was. She was certain he knew — the way he looked at her, as though assessing a target; how his hands gripped her, as though she might run. She would be ruined, and by a man whose own reputation was hardly spotless. The only question was whether he would ruin her with a clean cut direct — or demand something to buy his silence. The shiver that went through her on that thought didn't feel much like fear, but she refused to consider what it

might be instead.

She dug deep, ready to brazen it out. “You may not escort me to my carriage. My mother does not permit me to associate with strange men.” She nodded in the direction of Josephine, who closed her mouth and attempted to look dignified.

“Your mother?” Ferguson asked. He was understandably skeptical, since Josephine was nearly six inches shorter than Madeleine and dressed in plain, serviceable grey. “And what of Monsieur Guerrier?”

“Sadly, he left me alone in the world,” she said, sniffing as though the memory of her nonexistent husband still caused her pain.

“A pity, I am sure,” he said, a predatory smile playing on his lips.

She swatted his arm and tried again to pull away. “It was a tragedy. Now if you will excuse me, I really must be home before the hour grows any later.”

He smoothly turned her, taking her arm as though they were a couple on promenade. She could feel the taut muscles trapping her against him — and was reminded that this was not a weak lordling, but a man used to having his way. “My dear Madame Guerrier.. what is your Christian name?”

The question caught her off guard. “Marguerite,” she said, maintaining her fake identity despite the slamming of her heart against her ribs.

“Marguerite,” he said, the word rolling over his tongue as though he could seduce her just with the sound of it. “Marguerite, I can hardly hope you will give me the answer I want to hear — but tell me, have you taken a protector?”

She stopped in her tracks. Of all the questions she thought he might ask her — why she was in disguise, how she could act in such a place, what she would do to stop him from ruining her — she didn’t expect this. “How can you ask such a thing?”

“This is surely not the first time a man has asked you?”

She waved a hand in the air, pretending she had been offered for many times before. “The ton would expect you to do better than an unknown actress from Seven Dials.”

He laughed. “All mistresses start somewhere, darling. But I must confess I have little use for the ton, nor it for me.”

He said it lightly, but Madeleine caught a glimpse of the lost boy

beneath his polished masculinity. He almost sounded lonely.

Rather how she often felt herself.

So even though she should have run shrieking from him, that flash of sympathy made her soften the blow. “It is too soon to speak of such things, your grace.”

“I have not taken a mistress in years, nor have I ever offered for one without having a single conversation. But you are too lovely and too talented to miss. It is not just likely that you will become someone’s mistress — it is inevitable.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “If you think so little of my virtue, then I must bid you good evening.”

“Your virtue is something you wish to protect?”

“It is,” Madeleine said. If there was a tremor in her voice, it was from indignation at the way his hand forced her chin up to look into his face, not from the pleasure she got from his touch.

He held her there for an endless minute. She couldn’t see him properly in the dark, but felt everything in his gaze — attraction, annoyance, a devilish sense of humor, an autocratic need to be obeyed. But it was the heat lurking underneath that made her nervous — and set off a matching heat as she blushed under his assessing eyes.

Finally, he released her. She might have fallen from relief if her knees weren’t locked in place. “Madame Guerrier, you have my apologies. I should not have assumed you were like every other actress in London. Your virtue is as superlative as your talent.”

She inclined her head, accepting his apology.

Then he stepped closer. “But in case you do not realize what you are denying...”

He pulled her into his arms, brushing a light kiss across her lips. The feel of his hands was like the satin and steel of a corset as they wrapped around her, sensuous and unforgiving. The surprising heat of his mouth on hers made her gasp. Her shoes, higher than she normally wore, unbalanced her, and she leaned into him without thinking. As his kiss grew more insistent, she felt herself melting. This was the kind of kiss she imagined, the kind that made every other man fade into nothingness. Her dream the night before had not prepared her for the reality of Ferguson’s touch, hot and hungry

for her. She might have even kissed him back...

But then Josephine shrieked in outrage and clouted him on the back with her valise. The force of the blow pushed him against her for one moment before he caught himself and set her back on her feet with a laugh.

“Very well, madame, I shall not attempt to seduce your daughter... tonight,” he said, winking at Madeleine.

He let her pull away from him, although she still felt warm and trembly from the need that overrode her caution. “Perhaps I shall seek you out and ask for your company again,” he said. Then he picked up her hand and brought it to his lips. “Or perhaps we will find a more pleasurable method of persuasion.”

She shivered under his touch as the implication of his words washed through her. “I really mustn’t.”

He handed her up into the carriage. “Then I live in hope that you will change your mind.”

It was a pretty phrase, but his eyes still looked hot and demanding as he stepped away from the coach. He helped Josephine into the coach as well, even though she glared at him like a revolutionary sizing up an aristocrat’s neck for the guillotine. Then he tipped his hat to Madeleine. “Until your next performance, Madame Guerrier.”

He shut the door and Madeleine collapsed into the seat. She would be ruined. Whether caught by her family, recognized on the stage, or found out by the duke of Rothwell, she couldn’t keep the sterling reputation her years as a spinster had gained her.

Ferguson’s gaze, the feel of his lips, the heat of his arms around her — she still felt it all, like a brand on her skin. She shifted in her seat as that tiny kernel of desire within her eased some of her fear. If her ruin was inevitable, she suspected that ruin at Ferguson’s hands would be the most pleasurable alternative.

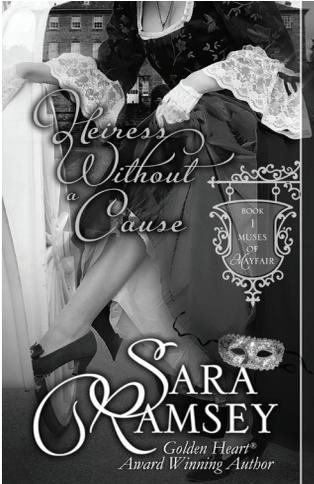
Josephine handed her a fan from the depths of her valise. “You must not let yourself be upset, *ma petite*,” she said, even though she sounded upset herself.

Madeleine cooled herself with the fan, trying to calm her nerves. Ferguson had made an outrageous proposal — but he did not seem to know who she was, and she must keep him from guessing. She would go to every social event her theatre schedule would permit and sit primly with the other ape-leaders. She would also fulfill her duties as the twins’

chaperone, but would only call on them when Ferguson was too occupied to stumble upon her.

She might prefer the duke's touch to a more garden-variety scandal — but she was much too smart to seek it out.

\* \* \*



### ***Heiress Without a Cause***

Muses of Mayfair Book 1 - available now

*One title to change his life...*

A disgraced son with a dark reputation, William “Ferguson” Avenel is content to live in exile - until his father dies in the scandal of the Season. With rumors of insanity swirling around them, his sisters desperately need a chaperone. Ferguson thinks he's found the most proper woman in England - and he won't ruin her, even if he secretly desires the

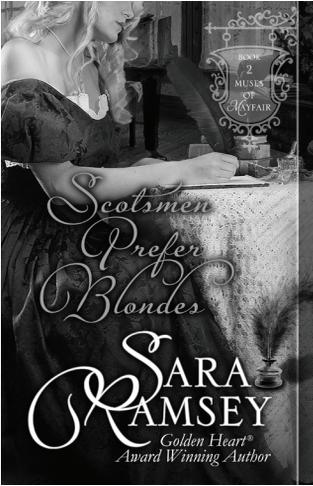
passionate woman trapped beneath a spinster's cap.

*One chance to break the rules...*

Lady Madeleine Vaillant can't face her blighted future without making one glorious memory for herself. In disguise, on a London stage, she finds all the adoration she never felt from the ton. But when she's nearly recognized, she will do anything to hide her identity - even setting up her actress persona as Ferguson's mistress. She'll take the pleasure he offers, but Madeleine won't lose her heart in the bargain.

*One season to fall in love...*

Every stolen kiss could lead to discovery, and Ferguson's old enemies are determined to ruin them both. But as their dangerous passion ignites their hearts and threatens their futures, how can an heiress who dreams of freedom deny the duke who demands her love?



## ***Scotsmen Prefer Blondes***

Muses of Mayfair Book 2 - available now

When a friend is forced to consider a marriage of convenience, Lady Amelia Staunton is determined to rescue her. But her plans trap her in an illicit seduction, and Amelia must marry him herself! Malcolm MacCabe's all-consuming kisses and devilish humor might make up for her lost freedom - but how can she choose between the novels she's always longed to write and the love that could destroy them both?

### **Praise for the Muses of Mayfair Series**

“A feisty independent heroine tames an arrogantly handsome hero in this Regency romance filled with witty banter and dicey situations. Ramsey snares her readers from the first...”

- 4.5 stars, Singletitles.com (*Heiress Without a Cause*)

“I am declaring myself an irrevocable fan of Sara Ramsey. The interaction between the characters couldn't have been any better... and the sensual tension had me on my toes.”

- 5 stars, In Luv With Romance (*Scotsmen Prefer Blondes*)

“Ms. Ramsey continues to impress me with her portrayal of the friendship of her Muses...deep down their respect and love of each other and their passion for their art is something that will always keep their friendships strong...and Malcolm is a hero to die for!”

- 4 stars, Bookworm 2 Bookworm (*Scotsmen Prefer Blondes*)

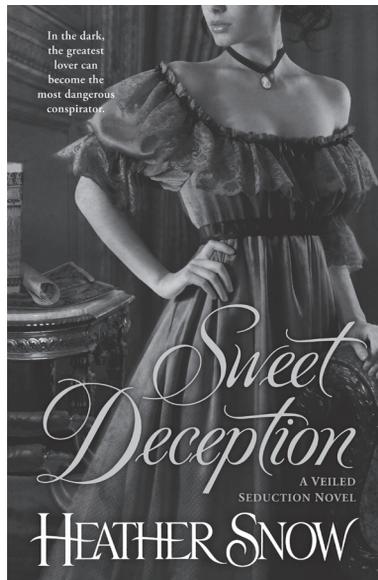
\* \* \*

Sara Ramsey writes fun, feisty Regency romances. She grew up in a small town in Iowa, and her obsession with fashion, shoes, and all things British is clearly a rebellion against her hopelessly uncool youth. Sara lives the hip Regency writer life in San Francisco, California.

**[www.sararamsey.com](http://www.sararamsey.com)**

[www.twitter.com/sara\\_ramsey](https://www.twitter.com/sara_ramsey) | [www.facebook.com/sara.ramsey](https://www.facebook.com/sara.ramsey)

# Sweet Deception Heather Snow



Lord Derick Aveline has to finish one last mission before leaving his days of espionage behind—but his hunt for a traitor leads him to the doorstep of his childhood friend, Emma Wallingford. When deception, however sweet, is the name of the game, no one can be trusted. And every love—and every life—is at risk...

*An excerpt from Derick's first visit to Wallingford Manor to begin his investigation...*

**H**e could always resort to a late-night exploration if he must. His imagination flashed a vision of him happening across Emma, tucked into her bed in nothing but a flimsy night rail. What would she look like, her features relaxed in sleep, her hair down and spread across her pillow?

Derick's entire body tightened like a fist as his mind emptied of all thoughts but her. Her tempting scent would alter with her skin warmed from sleep, would sweeten tantalizingly like nectar.

Derick caught himself taking a deep breath. Damnation. This was precisely why he shouldn't be around Emma. He hadn't physically seen the woman in hours and yet he was thoroughly distracted, which made no sense whatsoever. He didn't even *like* her.

The door clicked, and Derick's mind snapped back to the charade at hand. He stepped from behind the chaise to greet Lord Wallingford, a droll greeting on his lips.

His mouth snapped shut as Emma, not Wallingford, strode into the room, her skirts swishing behind her. She stopped abruptly only a scant two feet from him, her eyes traveling his length.

Her sudden nearness hummed in his veins. Damn, but those eyes of hers made a man feel she could see right through him. Derick fought the ridiculous urge to step back from her frank perusal. He had no reason for concern—he knew exactly what she would see. He'd planned every detail.

Gold buttons winked in the sun that beamed through the massive windows, his burgundy and cream striped waistcoat contrasted nicely with his buff pantaloons, and his black Hessians fair gleamed. While he'd never go so far as to polish them with champagne, as Brummel had so famously espoused, Derick would challenge the man himself to find any other fault with his presentation.

And that's what it was—the pretentious clothing, the intricately tied neck cloth, the close-shaven face, the precisely styled hair—a presentation. A uniform.

*And today, perhaps even a suit of armor.*

His mouth twisted wryly. As if he needed protection from Emma Wallingford. "Why are *you* here?"

Emma's brows dipped and her mouth wobbled, like she couldn't decide whether to smile or scowl. "I *live* here, Derick."

*Imbecile.* "Yes, of course." Really, if his superiors could see him now, they'd never have entrusted the country's greatest secrets to him. At least his incompetent fop act should be especially believable today. "What I meant to say was that I was expecting your brother."

Emma crossed her arms. "Yes, Perkins said you wished to speak with the magistrate. Why?"

The back of Derick's neck tingled. She was on the defensive.

Interesting. Because of his desire to see her brother? Or because of him? Both were intriguing questions, but for different reasons.

A slow heat spread through him at the possibility that he might have the same physical effect on her as she did on him. He might be able to use that.

No. He was finished with those days, when seduction had been his stock-in-trade. He shouldn't need to resort to sensual interrogation. He would be able to get what he needed from Lord Wallingford—if he could get past the man's formidably lovely gatekeeper. "I should think that obvious."

"Indeed." Emma's expression turned to a decided scowl, and her foot tapped in irritation. "What is not so obvious," she continued in a clipped tone, "is why you should feel it necessary to insert yourself into an investigation that has nothing to do with you."

Oh, yes . . . she was most certainly defensive. Which meant he was onto something. The question was, what?

The quickest way to get answers was to stick to his story. "Because the girl was a member—"

"—of your household." Disapproval dripped from Emma's voice, landing on him like a particularly annoying drizzle. She blinked up at him with those owl-like eyes. "Am I to assume that you intend to stay in Derbyshire and take up the reins at the castle, then?"

Derick chafed at the censure in her tone. "Good God, no. This would be the *last* place I would live. I don't expect to be here more than a few weeks at most," he answered. "As if that's any of your concern," he grumbled under his breath. He swiped a hand across his forehead. She was wasting his time. Nosy, irritating chit. "Damnation, Emma, you are *exactly* as you were as a girl."

Derick couldn't keep his eyes from dropping to her cleavage, so lasciviously pushed up by her crossed arms. "Well, not *exactly*," he muttered.

Emma's shoulders rose slightly as a tiny gasp escaped her. "Of course I'm not."

Hell. Had he actually just said that aloud? What had gotten into him?

"I've changed quite significantly." She sniffed. "I'm no longer straw-headed, for one. I speak four additional languages than I did when you last

knew me and I've grown at least two hands taller."

A huff of laughter escaped him at her attempt to lighten the moment, but it quickly faded. Emma wasn't smiling.

Instead she heaved a sigh, uncrossed her arms and turned her body, as if to allow him a clear path to the door. She even extended a delicate hand in that direction, wafting her delicious lavender scent near. "Listen, while I appreciate your assistance last evening, my lord, you needn't concern yourself any further. I suggest you go about whatever . . . *business* a gentleman like yourself might have in Derbyshire. There's no need for you to dirty your hands"—her gaze traveled over him again and her lips flattened—"or your fancy clothes with the matter."

Derick pressed his fingers against his forehead, closing his eyes. This was not going according to plan. He'd never had such trouble bending a female to his will.

Except her. What *was* it about Emma that threw him off so?

*She makes you forget your role.*

Yes. Something about her reduced some part of him to the boy he didn't even remember being—a singular and disturbing truth he couldn't avoid or fathom. All he knew was that it was true—and dangerous—which made it all the more important for him to deal solely with her brother. It was time to regain command of this conversation. Derick straightened, crossed his own arms and leveled his gaze on her.

"I suggest," he drawled, looking down his nose at her in a way certain to nettle, "that you fetch the magistrate like a good girl and then go about whatever . . . *business* a country miss like you should be doing. No doubt there's a pillow that needs embroidering somewhere?"

Emma's eyes became slits, and he bit back a satisfied grin. That should send her off in a huff to get her brother.

Yet she visibly dug in her heels and crossed her arms again, pushing her delectable décolletage prominently back into view. A view, of course, that he couldn't help but avail himself of. He might be acting a part, but he *was* still male.

Emma clenched her jaw. The nerve of the man! How dare this . . . this perfectly turned-out popinjay come to her home and provoke her? The cad didn't even have the decency to look her in the eye after insulting her

so. And what was he staring at? She followed the path of his eyes, her chin dipping as she looked down to her . . .

Her cheeks flamed and she hastily dropped her arms. And yet the heat from her face spread down her neck and through her chest. She knew better than to think that Derick actually found *her* attractive. He certainly never had when they were younger, no matter how she'd tried to get him to notice her. But he'd certainly *seemed* captivated just then, hadn't he?

She couldn't resist a curious peek at his face. But the corners of his eyes drooped along with his mouth in an expression that could only be described as blasé. Her face burned all the more. Had she really expected otherwise?

Blasted, confusing man. Why wouldn't he just waltz blithely off on his merry way? "You said you have no intention of staying in Derbyshire at all. Why won't you just leave matters be?"

A tremble rolled through her middle as she considered what was at stake. What an ironic sort of travesty it would be if Derick, who couldn't be bothered with this village for an age, came back on a lark and discovered her brother's secret. He could use it to destroy the life she'd worked so hard to fashion for herself after her father's death, and then he would just trot back to London—or France—or wherever he'd been for the last decade and a half.

Derick raised his chin a notch and stared at her with those unnerving green eyes, suddenly anything but uninterested. "Why do *you* so badly wish me to?"

The rolling multiplied, magnified. Emma swallowed. That was a line of questioning she had no intention of following.

She couldn't take the chance that he would puff up with autocratic male pride and act . . . well, exactly like he was acting now. If he uncovered the truth about her brother, a man like him would think it his duty to take the matter to higher authorities. That was certain to bring her comfortable life crashing down around her. No. She needed to get him out of the house, none the wiser, before he had the opportunity to make trouble...

## ***Praise for the novels of Heather Snow...***

**“In the Veiled Seduction series, newcomer Snow makes a mark on the genre.” ~ RTBookReviews**

**“A wonderful, emotional and intellectually satisfying read.” ~ All About Romance (naming Sweet Enemy A Desert Island Keeper Pick)**

**“Well deserving of the Perfect 10 rating, readers, will be eagerly anticipating another novel by this delightful author.” ~ Romance Reviews Today**

**“Readers will be delighted to add Ms. Snow to their list of must-read authors.” ~ BookPage**

**“Not often do I pick up something that sucks me in so thoroughly that I have no concept of anything else but the world in the book I am reading.” ~ The Book Reading Gals**

**“I. Loved. This. Book. Ms. Snow shoots outside the box in creating her characters and achieves magical results.” ~Readers Edyn**

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  
www.facebook.com/AuthorHeatherSnow  
www.twitter.com/HeatherSnowRW

*Sweet Deception* is the second in the *Veiled Seduction* series. Look for *Sweet Enemy*, already in bookstores, and *Sweet Madness*, coming June 2013

Penguin/NAL Signet Eclipse,  
ISBN-13: 978-0451237606, August 7, 2012  
**www.HeatherSnowBooks.com**

All excerpts in this booklet are used by permission of the author and/or publisher solely for this publication. Excerpts may not be copied in any form without express permission from the author and/or publisher. All excerpts are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidences are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All rights reserved.

*'Twas the Night After Christmas* - Sabrina Jeffries  
Copyright © 2012 by Deborah Gonzales. All rights reserved.  
ISBN-13: 9781451642469

*Secrets of a Wedding Night* - Valerie Bowman  
Copyright © 2012 by Valerie Bowman. All rights reserved.  
ISBN-13: 9781250008954

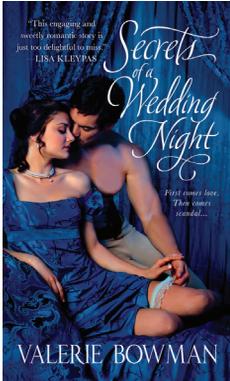
*To Seduce a Scoundrel* - Darcy Burke  
Copyright © 2012 by Darcy Burke. All rights reserved.  
ISBN-13: 978-0615639536

*More Than a Stranger* - Erin Knightley  
Copyright © 2012 by Erin Rieber. All rights reserved.  
ISBN-13: 9780451237712

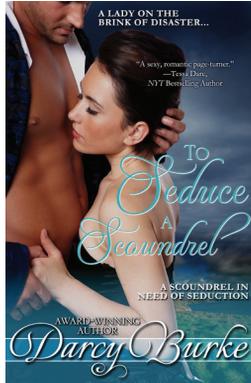
*The Runaway Countess* - Leigh LaValle  
Copyright © 2012 by Leigh LaValle. All rights reserved.  
ISBN-13: 978-1-60928-768-9

*Sweet Deception* - Heather Snow  
Copyright © 2012 by Heather Snow. All rights reserved.  
From SWEET DECEPTION to be published August, 2012, by Signet Eclipse,  
a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Used by permission of Penguin Group  
(USA) Inc.  
ISBN-13: 978-0451237606

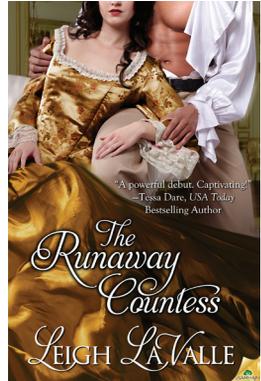
*Heiress Without a Cause* - Sara Ramsey  
Copyright © 2012 by Sara Wampler. All rights reserved.  
ISBN-13: 978-1-938312-00-7



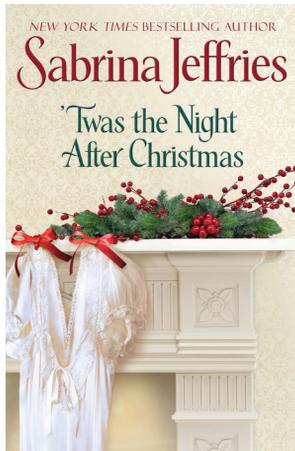
**Secrets of a Wedding Night**  
 ISBN-13: 9781250008954



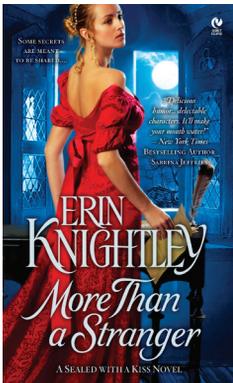
**To Seduce a Scoundrel**  
 ISBN-13: 978-0615639536



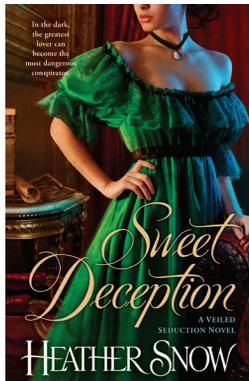
**The Runaway Countess**  
 ISBN-13: 978-1-60928-768-9



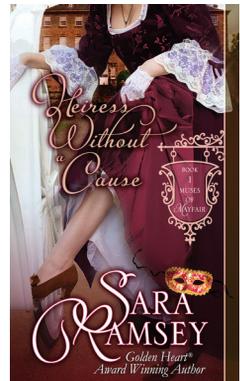
**'Twas the Night After Christmas**  
 ISBN-13: 9781451642469



**More Than a Stranger**  
 ISBN-13: 9780451237712



**Sweet Deception**  
 ISBN-13: 978-0451237606



**Heiress Without a Cause**  
 ISBN-13: 978-1-938312-00-7