

In Pursuit of Civility

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Books by Jen Turano

LADIES OF DISTINCTION

Gentleman of Her Dreams: A LADIES OF DISTINCTION Novella from With All My Heart Romance Collection

A Change of Fortune

A Most Peculiar Circumstance

A Talent for Trouble

A Match of Wits

A CLASS OF THEIR OWN

After a Fashion

In Good Company

Playing the Part

APART FROM THE CROWD

At Your Request: An APART FROM THE CROWD Novella from All for Love Romance Collection

Behind the Scenes

Out of the Ordinary

Caught by Surprise

AMERICAN HEIRESES

Flights of Fancy

Diamond in the Rough

Storing Up Trouble

Grand Encounters: A HARVEY HOUSE BRIDES COLLECTION Novella from Serving Up Love

THE BLEECKER STREET INQUIRY AGENCY

To Steal a Heart

To Write a Wrong

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To Disguise the Truth

THE MATCHMAKERS

A Match in the Making

To Spark a Match

Meeting Her Match

MERRIWEATHER ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

A Lesson in Propriety

In Pursuit of Civility

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Merriweather Academy for Young Ladies

In Pursuit of Civility

Jen Turano

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In Memory of Michael Gibas.

This one's for you, Mike, my favorite brother-in-law who added so much fun
to the family.

Wish you could have stayed around to enjoy the beach longer, but know that
we're always thinking about you!

Miss you more than words can say.

Love,
Jen

One

Chicago Fall 1885

In hindsight, taking a small group of students from the Merriweather Academy for Young Ladies to a county fair to assess their progress regarding the rudimentary rules of civility wasn't quite the brilliant opportunity Miss Annaliese Merriweather had expected it to be—not when two of the five young ladies had slipped away from the group, undoubtedly intent on delving into a bit of mischief.

Resisting the inclination to heave a perfectly justifiable sigh, Annaliese summoned up what she hoped would be taken as a stern look instead.

Truth be told, she wasn't a lady who was predisposed to stern looks in general, but if she'd learned anything during the scant four months she'd taken up the unexpected role of decorum instructor, it was this: Young ladies who'd spent their lives with little instruction pertaining to the rules of propriety were far more likely to respond to a stern look over any expression that hinted at even a smidgen of geniality.

After tucking a strand of flyaway red hair behind her ear, Annaliese settled her attention on the student most likely to fold under pressure—Miss Coraline Whittenbecker, who'd recently become related to Annaliese through the marriage of Drusilla Merriweather, Annaliese's sister, to Rhenick Whittenbecker, Coraline's brother.

"Any thoughts as to where Norma Jean and Velma might have wandered off to?" she asked, which earned her a rather deer-in-the lantern-lights look before Coraline began taking a marked interest in the dirt she was now scuffing with her sturdy button-up boot.

"Well, ah, not that I know this for certain," Coraline began, "but Norma Jean *might* have gone off to speak to her brother Seth."

"And she didn't ask permission from me to do that because . . . ?"

"I'm sure she didn't want to interrupt your scolding of that man you felt was mistreating his performing monkey."

"It wasn't as if I simply *felt* he was mistreating the monkey. He *was* mistreating it as I'm sure the poor monkey didn't appreciate being poked with a stick when it couldn't maintain its balance on a bicycle."

"And I'm sure everyone within the near vicinity of the monkey is now aware of its mistreatment since you were really loud when you were taking the man to task over the poking incident."

"My distraction with the monkey is hardly a credible excuse for Norma Jean to meander off without a word to me."

"Maybe not, but after Pippin jumped off your shoulder and looked like she wanted to tussle with the monkey man, your distraction level increased." Coraline stopped her scuffing and looked up. "Everyone knows your ferrets can turn vicious when provoked. I'm sure Norma Jean decided that you

would have your hands full managing Pippin and left the group without bothering you, thinking she'd be back before you had your ferret under control again."

Annaliese took a second to give a scratch to Pippin, the neediest of her three rescue ferrets, who was lounging around her neck and taking a well-deserved rest after her almost-attack of a horrid monkey owner. After earning a chirp from Pippin in return, she resettled her attention on Coraline and frowned when a thought took that moment to strike. "If Norma Jean truly was off to have a word with Seth, why didn't you go with her?"

"And chance leaving you annoyed with me when we've only just become related?" Coraline asked with a far-too-innocent bat of her lashes. "I think not."

The innocent lash batting continued, a telling sign if there ever was one.

Annaliese tilted her head. "Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but aren't you the young lady who only two or three weeks ago was proclaiming in our table etiquette class that Seth McCormick was the dreamiest man you've ever laid eyes on?"

"You heard that?" Coraline asked.

"You weren't exactly speaking in a hushed tone."

"I thought you were occupied with instructing Penina Zambarello on how to properly butter a piece of bread when I was talking about Seth," Coraline muttered.

"It's not as if my ears were occupied as I watched Penina butter bread, but to return to my point. If, as you said, Norma Jean went off to speak with Seth and you consider that man oh-so-dreamy, I would have thought you'd have seen that as a prime opportunity to admire Seth and all his dreaminess again."

"Coraline's no longer smitten with Seth McCormick," Miss Phoebe Studebaker blurted out, earning an immediate scowl from Coraline in the process.

Phoebe missed the scowl because she'd returned to ripping off a piece of the turkey leg she was clutching in her now grease-stained gloved hand, a piece she shoveled into her mouth. A few rapid chews commenced before she swallowed and patted her chest, eliciting a very unladylike belch, then opened her mouth. "Coraline, like a lot of other girls, finds Riley, your stable hand, to be far dreamier than Seth these days. That's why all of us were disappointed when you arrived to pick us up in the wagon instead of having Riley drive us in one of the Merriweather carriages."

Before Annaliese had time to grasp the notion that the apparent dreaminess of her stable hand was obviously behind why so many young ladies at the academy had broached the subject of adding riding lessons into their weekly schedules, let alone address the whole inappropriate belching situation, Coraline crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't recall asking you, Phoebe, for your input regarding my interest in Seth McCormick *or* Riley," Coraline grumbled before she turned a scowl Annaliese's way. "And even though you're the decorum instructor, Miss

Merriweather, it's hardly a mark of proper civility to insert matters like dreaminess into a conversation in such a willy-nilly fashion. Willy-nilly fashion tends to take a person by complete surprise, especially if it revolves around subjects such as dreaminess. Furthermore, broaching this topic goes completely against the unwritten code ladies are expected to adhere to about these matters."

"There's a code?" Annaliese asked.

"More than one," said Miss Mabel Glessner, whose father had made millions in the lumber business, before Coraline could do more than nod. Mabel gnawed at her turkey leg for a moment, swiped a sleeve over the turkey grease that was left behind on her chin, and wrinkled her nose. "I would have thought, Miss Merriweather, since you attended that fancy lady academy in New York, that all of the numerous friends I'm sure you had there would have spent their time with you whispering about all the codes and what lady friends could and couldn't speak about when out with ladies who weren't considered the best of friends."

Considering most members of the feminine set found her to be more than a little peculiar, Annaliese had never enjoyed a close-knit circle of friends, which explained why she was evidently woefully uninformed about lady codes.

Knowing it would hardly benefit her to admit to pupils who seemed to have a problem with authority figures that a lot of people found her odd, Annaliese settled for sending Mabel an inclination of her head. "One *would* have thought I'd know such things, but clearly I'm going to need to brush up on lady codes as I was unaware that the topic of dreaminess was deemed prohibited unless one is speaking to very good friends." She nodded to the turkey leg Mabel was now practically inhaling. "While I'm doing that, I'm going to suggest you brush up on the notes I hope you took during our proper table etiquette lesson last week as I clearly stated that young ladies should never use their sleeve as a napkin, nor should they ever gnaw on bones."

After licking her lips, Mabel shrugged shoulders covered in a fine wool cloak that, unsurprisingly, had gotten stained with turkey grease. "Honestly, Miss Merriweather, it's not as if we're sitting down to a formal dinner. We're at a fair, and in case you missed it, we passed a pie eating contest earlier where people were shoving entire pies into their mouths."

"I'm sure that's simply because those people have never availed themselves of a proper etiquette lesson, but further talk of basic expectations pertaining to manners even when at a fair will need to wait as we really do need to track down Norma Jean and Velma." She settled her attention on Coraline again. "You're absolutely certain Norma Jean went off to have a word with her brother?"

It was rather concerning when Coraline adopted the deer-in-the-lantern-lights expression again before she began scuffing her boot in the dirt once more.

"Nothing is ever *absolutely* certain when it concerns Norma Jean, but she *did* point Seth out to me earlier when we were strolling past the steam engine

display. She also said something about wanting to have a word with him regarding her need for some extra pin money.”

Apprehension was swift. “Why would Norma Jean be in need of extra pin money at this particular moment in time?”

Coraline paused with the scuffing. “I bet she forgot to bring money with her and wanted to make sure she had a few coins available in case something one of those vendors is selling caught her eye.”

Before Annaliese could point out that Norma Jean had already purchased a questionable-looking hat that had real pieces of fruit attached to it, which would certainly rot within a day, as well as attract bugs, Coraline sent her a bright smile.

“There’s no need for you to be worried about Norma Jean meandering off, though. It’s not as if she’s out there all alone since she took Velma Chickering with her. Velma, if you’re unaware, has a wicked right hook, taught to her by her uncle, Ewart Chickering, who decided he wanted nothing to do with the family pig-raising business and became a pugilist instead.”

“Which is impressive to be sure, but I doubt Velma’s pugilistic abilities will be very effective if they find themselves wandering into an area that’s unfit for young ladies. If you neglected to notice, I’ve made certain to keep us clear of any areas that seem even remotely questionable today.”

Coraline’s smile dimmed. “I wouldn’t think there *are* any questionable areas here as the advertisements we saw plastered around Chicago stated this fair was to be a family event.”

“And I’m sure whoever designed those advertisements did so with the belief that parents—or in your case, your instructor—would steer any children around dubious attractions such as the tent I saw that was selling large tankards of ale. That tent was within feet of the mermaid attraction, which is why I said we couldn’t view the mermaid lady today.”

Coraline glanced to Phoebe and Mabel. Some type of look was exchanged, one that probably had some kind of code attached to it, before she returned her attention to Annaliese. “Given what you just said, which we *were* unaware of, maybe it would be for the best if we track down Norma Jean and Velma sooner than later to be on the safe side.” With that, Coraline turned on her heel and began barreling her way through the crowd, moving at a pace that was just shy of a full-out run, which caused the apprehension Annaliese was already experiencing to intensify.

Not wanting to lose track of any additional students in her charge, she grabbed hold of Phoebe’s and Mabel’s hands and bolted after Coraline.

“I don’t think there’s any need for this amount of exertion,” Phoebe muttered before she tried to take another bite of her turkey leg as they dodged their way through the fairgoers. “Norma Jean makes a habit of meandering through the streets of Chicago, and she’s never run into more than a smidgen of trouble.”

“It was more than a smidgen of trouble when she almost got abducted a few months back,” Mabel argued around the large mouthful of turkey she’d just taken.

“I forgot about the almost-abduction,” Phoebe admitted.

“Norma Jean almost got abducted?” Annaliese asked, even though what she really wanted to ask was if Mabel had been sleeping her way through *all* the table etiquette lessons of late because speaking with your mouth full had certainly been addressed, and numerous times at that.

Mabel swallowed and gave a wave of her turkey leg, which sent more grease flying. “Indeed, and it all started when Norma Jean spotted a bright yellow phaeton.” Mabel bit off another piece of turkey, gave a few vigorous chews, and nodded. “Normally such a sight wouldn’t herald an abduction attempt, but Norma Jean wasn’t satisfied with merely watching the phaeton trundle past. She decided she wanted to interview the man driving it because she’d been thinking about adding a phaeton into a play she was writing—you know she longs to become a playwright someday—which turned out to be a grave error in judgment on her part.”

“In Norma Jean’s defense, she could have hardly known that the man tooling around in that phaeton had recently nicked it from Mr. Ogden’s front drive,” Phoebe argued before she chucked her partially finished turkey leg toward a rubbish bin. After the leg made it into the bin, an impressive shot since they were moving at a rapid pace, Phoebe swiped a hand over her mouth, missing a piece of turkey that was stuck directly to the left of her lips. “It *was* her fault, though, that after she stopped the phaeton by standing in front of it in the middle of the road, and after the driver told her to get out of his way, she made the monumental mistake of not taking that as a firm no and leapt up alongside the driver instead.”

Annaliese slowed their pace, and after checking to make certain that Coraline was still in sight, settled a frown on Phoebe. “Surely you’re mistaken, and Norma Jean didn’t truly jump into a stranger’s phaeton, did she?”

“Not mistaken. That’s exactly what she did,” Phoebe said. “And then, after Norma Jean settled herself next to the driver, policemen came barreling onto the scene, having been alerted about the phaeton theft by Mr. Ogden. They were apparently making an awful racket by blowing their whistles and then they gave chase when the thief sped off down the road. That’s when Norma Jean realized she’d gotten herself into a pickle. She then made the error of telling the thief she was from a wealthy family, and if he’d simply let her get out of the phaeton, she’d make sure he was well-compensated.”

“And he, being a criminal, decided to hold her for ransom instead?” Annaliese asked.

“Too right he did, and who knows what would have happened to Norma Jean if Seth hadn’t arrived on the scene—not because he knew Norma Jean was in trouble, but because his attention had been drawn to the phaeton after he’d stepped out of a general store and saw it careening down the road. He

immediately jumped on his horse and took off after it because he'd evidently been itching to get a closer look at Mr. Ogden's phaeton too."

"Norma Jean, thankfully, spotted her brother," Mabel added before she tossed her eaten-to-the-bone turkey leg toward a bin and missed, but was suddenly all smiles when a strapping young lad picked it up for her, placed it in the bin, and then began sauntering their way. He stopped in his tracks, though, when Annaliese sent him her stern look, which must have been sufficiently stern enough as he then turned in the opposite direction.

Grumpiness settled on Mabel's face. "I must have misunderstood your lesson the other day, Miss Merriweather, because I thought you said that when a gentleman performs an act of chivalry for a lady, that said lady was expected to extend a prettily phrased word of thanks to that gentleman in return."

"How reassuring to hear that you've at least been paying attention in a few of your lessons," Annaliese said. "However, since none of us have been introduced to that young gentleman, and we have no idea if he's reputable or not, sending him that smile you sent him was a sufficient thank-you. With that said, though, you might want to practice your smiles in the mirror as the one you just used might have been a tad too welcoming. But returning to your story—what did Norma Jean do after she spotted Seth?"

"She began yelling at the top of her lungs. Seth heard her, then went about the tricky business of rescuing her."

"He used some new contraption he'd been working on," Phoebe explained. "He'd apparently visited a ranch and decided ranch hands might find their job easier if they had a better way to lasso errant livestock. He then set about inventing a lasso that shoots out of the barrel of a pistol."

Annaliese's brow furrowed. "That would have to be some pistol as the rope needed to make a lasso would take up quite a bit of space."

"It looks like a portable cannon," Mabel admitted. "Seth just happened to have it attached to his saddlebag because he was heading back to that ranch for some target practice."

"Turns out he got to practice before he reached the ranch," Phoebe added. "From what was said, his invention—the *cowboy assistant* I think he calls it—worked like a charm, until . . ."

Annaliese's eyes widened. "Don't tell me it burst into flames like the flame thrower he used a few months back, did it?"

"There were no flames involved," Phoebe said. "But after he lassoed the thief, the mechanism that was supposed to retrieve the rope did so at a far greater speed than Seth was anticipating, which caused the lassoed thief to get pulled straight off his seat and out of the phaeton."

"That," Mabel continued, "left the phaeton without anyone holding the reins. Norma Jean told us that she saw her life flash before her eyes and was sure she wouldn't live to see another adventure. But then Seth jumped from his horse into the phaeton and saved the day."

Mabel released a rather dramatic sigh. "There's just something about a man who knows how to rescue damsels in distress that makes a girl's heart

go pitter-patter.” She heaved another sigh, this one more dramatic than the first. “But even though Seth is a swoon-worthy gentleman if there ever was one, we girls have come to realize that he might be a tad too old for us. We’ve also realized that, because of the age difference, he probably views us as children. That right there explains why even though he’s very nice to us when we coerce Norma Jean into taking us over to his house to watch him work on his inventions, he never makes much of an attempt to speak to us about anything other than the invention he’s working on.”

Phoebe released a snort. “I’m not sure *watching* is an apt way to describe what most of us do. Ogling would be a better way to phrase it.”

Mabel’s nose shot into the air. “Seems like you might benefit from studying up on lady codes as well, Phoebe, since letting Miss Merriweather know we might delve into ogling Seth McCormick every so often will surely leave her adding a whole lesson regarding the prohibition of ogling into our curriculum.”

“I’m sure Miss Merriweather understands our ogling since she’s probably not immune to Seth’s attractiveness, or charm for that matter, but . . .”

Phoebe suddenly stopped talking and began giving Annaliese a thorough perusal before she smiled. “Have you ever noticed, Mabel, exactly how beautiful Miss Merriweather is?”

Mabel came to a complete halt, jerking Annaliese and Phoebe to a stop as well. “On my word, but you’re right. She is quite beautiful.”

The hair on the nape of Annaliese’s neck began to tingle when Mabel and Phoebe settled overly bright smiles on her.

“Just imagine,” Phoebe began, “if Miss Merriweather and Seth, who is beautiful in his own right, were to make a match of it, how adorable any babies they might have would be.”

“Oh yes, adorable,” Mabel agreed.

Phoebe’s eyes began to sparkle in a more than concerning fashion as she tapped a finger against her chin, then nodded. “We’ll need to call a meeting of all of our friends just as soon as possible to plan out the particulars.”

“Particulars?” Annaliese forced herself to ask.

“Quite right, but no need to concern yourself with those, Miss Merriweather, as you’ll be in good hands with me and the rest of the girls.” Phoebe sent her a knowing smile. “Why, you mark my words, I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re capable of seeing you and Seth married off in no time, and probably before Christmas if we get right down to planning what will certainly be seen as Chicago’s greatest match of the year.”