



Unclaimed (A Turner Series Book 2)

By Courtney Milan

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But Jessica is a courtesan, not the respectable lady Sir Mark believes. When Mark's enemies ask her to seduce him and destroy his good name, she agrees. The money they offer will allow her to escape a life that has become unbearable. But along the road to seduction, the worst happens: Jessica falls in love. The only way to win the freedom she needs is to destroy the most honorable man she's ever met...

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Unclaimed is the second book in the Turner series. The full series is:

- *Unveiled*
- *Unlocked*, a companion novella
- *Unclaimed*
- *Unraveled*

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Editorial Review

Review

"An addictively readable tale of revenge and redemption, love and family, *Unveiled* is brilliant."

–Booklist

"An exquisitely sensual and unforgettable romance by one of the genre's incandescent new stars."

-Booklist (starred review) on *Trial by Desire*

"Historical romance fans will celebrate Milan's powerhouse debut, which comes with a full complement of humor, characterization, plot and sheer gutsiness."

-Publishers Weekly (starred review) on *Proof by Seduction*

"A brilliant debut...deeply romantic, sexy and smart."

-New York Times bestselling author Eloisa James on *Proof by Seduction*

About the Author

Courtney Milan's debut novel was published in 2010 to instant critical acclaim. Now a *New York Times* and a *USA Today* Bestseller, her books have also received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. Her second book was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 2010. She has been a RITA® finalist and an RT Reviewer's Choice nominee for Best First Historical Romance.

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

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London June, 1841

Sir Mark Turner did not look like any virgin that Jessica had ever seen before.

Perhaps, she mused, it was because he was surrounded by women.

The uneven glass of the taproom window obscured the tableau unfolding across the street. Not that she would have been able to see anything, even had she been standing in the muck of the road. After all, it had taken less than a minute for the mob to form. The instant Sir Mark had come out the door across the way, a carriage had come to an abrupt halt. A pair of young ladies had spilled out, tugged along by an eager chaperone. Two elderly matrons, strolling along the gangway, had laid eyes on him a few moments later and

darted in front of a cart with surprising speed.

The oldest woman now had one clawed hand on the cuff of his greatcoat and the other on her cane—and she was merely the most aggressive of his hangers-on. Sir Mark was thronged on all sides by women...and the occasional man, sporting one of those ridiculous blue rose cockades on his hat. Jessica could see nothing of him through the crowd but the gray of his coat and a glint of golden hair. Still, she could imagine him flashing that famous smile reproduced in woodcuts in all the newspapers: a confident, winning grin, as if he were aware that he was the most sought-after bachelor in London.

Jessica had no desire to join the throng around Sir Mark. She had no autograph book to wave at him, and the likes of her wouldn't have been welcomed in any event.

Sir Mark handled the crowd well. He didn't bask in the attention, as the men of Jessica's acquaintance might have done. Neither did he shrink from the pressing women. Instead, he ordered them about with an air of gentle command—signing the little books with a pencil he produced from a pocket, shaking hands—all the while making his way inexorably toward the street corner, where a carriage stood.

When Jessica thought of virgins, she imagined youths plagued by red spots or youngsters who wore thick spectacles and spoke with a stammer. She didn't think of blond men with clean-shaven, angular faces. She certainly didn't imagine tall fellows whose smiles lit up the dark, rainy street. It all went to show: Jessica knew nothing of virgins.

Hardly a surprise. She'd not spoken to a single one, not in all her years in London.

Beside her, George Weston let out a snort. "Look at him," he scoffed. "He's acting like a damned jackanapes—parading up and down the street as if he owned the place."

Jessica traced her finger against the window. In point of fact, Sir Mark's brother, newly the Duke of Parford, *did* own half the buildings on the street. It would annoy Weston if she corrected him, and so for a moment, she considered doing so.

But then, Sir Mark's presence was irritation enough. Some days, it seemed as if every society paper in London sent out a new issue every time he sneezed. Not much of an exaggeration. How many times had she passed post-boys waving scandal sheets, headlines a half-page high declaring: *Sir Mark: Threatened by Illness?*

"He must think," Weston continued, "that just because his brother is a duke—" he spat those words "—and the Queen has shown him a little favor, that he can caper about, displacing everyone who stands as his better. Did you know they're considering him for Commissioner?"

Jessica slanted him another glance. No; no need to rile the man. He could work himself into a lather without any help from her, and for now, she still needed him.

"He's never had to try for anything," Weston grouched. "It just falls in his lap. And here I've been running myself ragged, trying to put myself forward. Lefevre's spot was practically *promised* to me. But no—now it's Turner's for the asking."

Sir Mark reached his carriage. He smiled to one and all. Even inside the taproom, Jessica could hear the cries of disappointment as a footman closed the carriage door.

"I don't understand how he became such a darling of London society," Weston vented. "Would you believe that they've tapped him for the office not because he has any administrative experience, but because they wish to increase public approval? Why everyone cares about *him*, I can't understand. He's unwilling to engage in even the most time-honored gentlemanly pursuits."

By which Weston undoubtedly meant drinking and wenching.

"He wrote a book." Jessica pressed her hands against her skirt. Understatement served her purposes better than truth. "It has enjoyed a run of some little popularity."

"Don't start on the bloody *Gentleman's Guide*," Weston growled. "And don't mention the bloody MCB, either. That man is a *plague* on my house."

Before Sir Mark's conveyance could spirit him away, the footmen had to politely clear the crowd from in front of the horses. The carriage was closed, but through a window on the side that faced her, Jessica could see Sir Mark's silhouette. He removed his hat and bowed his head. It was a posture halfway between despair and exhaustion.

So. All those smiles and handshakes were false. Good. A man who put on one false front would put on another, and if all his vaunted moral superiority was an act, it would make Jessica's work very, very easy. Besides, if Sir Mark despaired over a little thing like a mob determined to pay him adulation, he deserved what was coming to him. One paid a price for popularity.

And Sir Mark's book had been very popular indeed. The Queen had read it, and had knighted its author for his contribution to popular morality. Thereafter, his work had been read in all the favored salons in London. Every Sunday sermon quoted passages from the *Gentleman's Guide*. Why, just last month, a diminutive version had been printed, so that women could carry his words about in their skirt pockets—or in intimate compartments sewn into their petticoats for just that purpose.

There was something rather ironic, Jessica thought, about proper young ladies carrying *A Gentleman's Practical Guide to Chastity* as near to their naked thighs as they could manage.

But women were not his only devotees. Some days, it seemed as if half the men of London had joined that benighted organization of his followers. They were everywhere on the streets these days, with their blue cockades and their supposedly secret hand signals. Sir Mark had done the impossible. He'd made chastity *popular*.

Beside her, Weston watched with narrowed eyes as the carriage finally started up. The coachman flicked his whip, and the conveyance moved slowly through the gathered crowd. He shook his head and turned to consider Jessica. It was only in her imagination that his eyes left a rancid, oily film behind.

"I don't suppose you asked me here just so I could talk about the insufferable Mark Turner." His eyes fell to her bosom in idle, lecherous speculation. "I told you you'd miss me, Jess. Come. Tell me about this *proposition* of yours."

He took her arm; she gritted her teeth at the touch of his fingers and managed not to flinch.

She hated that appellation. *Jess* sounded like a falcon's leash, as if she were captured and hooded and possessed by him. She'd hated it ever since she realized she *had* been pinioned—tamed, taught commands

and trotted out on the occasions when he needed to make use of her. But she had hardly been in a position to object to his use of it.

Someday. Someday soon. It was not a promise she made as he led her to the table in the back room. It was a last breath of hope, whispered into darkness.

Jessica sat in the chair that Weston pulled up for her.

Six months ago, she'd sent him on his way. She'd thought she would never have to see him again. If her plan succeeded now, she would not have to. She would be free from Weston and London...and this life in its entirety.

Weston took his seat at the head of the table. Jessica stared across at him. She had never loved him, but for a while, he had been tolerable. Neither generous nor overly demanding. He had kept her safe and clothed. She hadn't needed to pretend too hard; he'd not wanted her false protestations of affection.

"Well, Jess," Weston said. "Shall I ring for tea?"

At the words, her hands clenched around the sticky wood of the taproom table. She could feel each of her breaths, sharp inside her lungs. They labored in the cavern of her breast, as if she were climbing to the top of a tower. For just an instant, she felt as if she *had* ascended some great height—as if this man was a small, distant specimen, viewed from on high. Reality seemed very far away.

What she managed to say was: "No tea."

"Oh." He glanced at her sidelong. "Ha. Right. I'd forgotten entirely. You're not still put out over *that*, are you?"

She had always thought that the life of a courtesan would take its toll slowly over time. That she might tolerate it for at least a decade to come, before her beauty slowly faded into age.

But no. Six months ago, her life had become unbearable over the course of one cup of tea. She didn't respond, and he sighed, slouching in his chair.

"Well, then. What is it you want?" he asked.

What she wanted sounded so simple. When she went outside, she wanted to feel the sunlight against her face.

She hadn't realized how bad matters had become until the first sunny day of spring had arrived. She'd gone outdoors—had been chivied outside, in fact, by a friend—to promenade in the park. She had felt nothing—not inside her, nor out. She hadn't felt cold. She hadn't felt warm. And when the spring sun had hit her face, it had been nothing but pale light.

This man had made her into dark gray stone, from the surface of her skin to the center of her soul. No nerves. No hopes. No *future*.

"I didn't come here to tell you what I want," she said firmly.

She wanted never again to have to fill another man's bed, telling falsehoods with her body until her mind

could no longer track her own desires. She wanted to rid herself of the murk and the mire that had filled her. This life had bound her as effectively as if she were a falcon tied by a leather shackle, and she wanted to be free.

She steepled her fingers. "You've offered a reward to the woman who seduces Sir Mark Turner."

These words had an immediate effect. Weston sucked his breath in. "How did you know that was me? I thought I kept that quiet." He looked at her. "It's supposed to be *quiet*. It's no good if I ruin the man at the expense of my own reputation."

She shrugged. "A little research. There's not much secrecy among courtesans."

"I shouldn't have bothered. A reward of three hundred pounds, and the finest whores in all of London have failed. Don't tell me *you're* thinking of taking him on, Jess."

She met his gaze without flinching.

"You *are* thinking of it." Weston's lip curled. "Of course you are. You're between protectors. Honestly, Jess. If you're that desperate for funds, I'll take you back."

After what he'd done to her six months ago, the offer should have made her skin crawl. As it was, the proposition felt like nothing more than the cold gray of shadow.

She should have yearned for justice. She should have wanted revenge. She should, at a minimum, have wanted to extract something from him, of a size and shape to fill the desolate wasteland of nothingness he'd left inside her.

But she'd learned years ago that there was no justice, not for a woman like her. There was no way to crawl backward, to unravel the harms that had been done. There were only small, timid paths to be found through tangled underbrush. If you were lucky, you might hit upon one and escape the dark forest.

"It happens," she said, "that I have something none of those other women had."

Weston rubbed his chin. "Well, what is it?"

Desperation, she thought.

But what she said was, "Information. Sir Mark is returning to his boyhood home for the summer—a small market town called Shepton Mallet. I gather he wants to escape the adoring throngs for a period. He'll be away from his loving public. Staying, not in his brother's mansion, packed with servants, but in an isolated house, with only a few villagers to come by and take care of his needs."

"That's not precisely a secret."

"With nobody watching him, he'll have the opportunity to stray from his righteous path. He wouldn't dare, here in London—he's the center of everyone's attention. Out there...?" She trailed off suggestively. "At a very minimum, I should like the chance to try."

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