



Lady Be Good (Rules for the Reckless)

By Meredith Duran

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The third searing novel in the Rules for the Reckless series by Meredith Duran, the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of sexy and evocative Regency romances in the tradition of Sarah MacLean.

CATCHING THE LADY RED-HANDED

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Christian “Kit” Stratton, Viscount Palmer, is society's most dashing war hero. But Kit's easy smiles hide a dark secret: he is haunted by a madman's vow to destroy anyone he loves. When his hunt for the enemy leads to Everleigh's Auction Rooms, he compels Lilah to help him. But one tempting touch may be their undoing—for what Kit needs threatens all Lilah holds dear, and losing her may destroy Kit.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Meredith Duran is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of ten previous novels. She blames Anne Boleyn for sparking her lifelong obsession with British history (and for convincing her that princely love is no prize if it doesn't come with a happily-ever-after). She enjoys collecting old etiquette manuals, guidebooks to nineteenth-century London, and travelogues by intrepid Victorian women.

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Lady Be Good

CHAPTER ONE



April 1886

There was room for only one thief in this ballroom. Yet a newcomer had slipped past the guards and was attempting to pickpocket the crowd.

Lilah watched with increasing dismay. Dukes and princes vied for invitations to the annual ball at Everleigh's Auction Rooms. It seemed impossible that a ragamuffin could infiltrate their company. Yet this urchin did not belong. She was pale, underfed, and poorly dressed. The sleeves of her gown flapped around her elbows.

Worse, she had hands like hams. Her mark felt her brush against him, then politely sidestepped before she could take his watch.

Lilah winced. In a second, some well-heeled guest would cry for the police. That would ruin everything, for Lilah could not afford police on the premises tonight.

Tonight, for the last time, Lilah must be the thief in this ballroom.

“What do you say, Lil?”

Forcing a smile, Lilah turned back to her friends. Like her, Susie and Lavender were Everleigh Girls, professional hostesses paid to flatter and cosset potential clients of the auction house. Their evening's task was straightforward: to direct the guests' attention and curiosity toward the salons adjoining the ballroom, which contained various collections bound for auction this season.

But while each of the girls had been given a list of guests to focus upon, Susie and Lavender had wasted the last five minutes locked in argument about somebody else—a celebrity important enough to be attended by Miss Everleigh rather than the hostesses.

They stared at Lilah, waiting for her to settle the debate.

But she had no opinion about Viscount Palmer. “I can see both perspectives,” she said.

Susie flushed. “What? Nonsense! Everybody knows he was tortured in the war. Where else did he get that scar?” She shoved a dark curl back under her feathered headpiece, the gesture aggressive. “You can’t imagine the Russians are merciful to their enemies.”

Lavender, to whom this challenge was directed, lifted her shoulder in an elegant shrug. “Not all Russians are savages. Count Obolensky, for instance, seems very gentlemanly. Oh dear—weren’t you supposed to corner him, Sue?”

Susie gasped, then cast a wild look around the room. “Drat it! He was the last on my list—I was meant to show him the samovars. I’ll be dead if I’ve lost him!”

Lavender gave Lilah a smug look. “Never let them go until they’ve seen the goods,” she said. “I finished with my list before supper was laid. And now . . .” She idly flipped through her dance cards, then wrinkled her nose. “Pah! That dratted German has claimed all my waltzes. Quick, who has a pencil? I’m scratching him out.”

“Forget your German!” Susie turned full circle, her plum silk train knocking into Lilah’s. “Help me find Obolensky. Do you see him?”

Lilah saw worse: the thief had grown bolder. She had abandoned the wall and was making a dash toward the exhibits. “I’ll check the salons,” she said. “Susie, you look by the punch table; Vinnie, try the hall.”

Before they could reply, Lilah slipped into the crowd. As she cut across the dance floor, she spotted Miss Everleigh dancing with the object of the girls’ argument.

The scar across Viscount Palmer’s cheek was generally accounted to be dashing. Certainly it did not hurt his looks. He was the picture of virile, laughing health: tall and broad shouldered, with thick gold hair and eyes to match. In Whitechapel, the girls would have called him a goer.

In fact, they had called him a goer. Her sister, Fiona, had clipped his likeness from the newspapers, and eagerly followed tales of his wartime bravery. A true gentleman, she’d called him. This is the kind of lad we deserve, Lily.

Had she lived, she would have been disappointed by the stiff competition for him. Now that he’d inherited the viscountcy, he was catnip for wealthy debutantes. One of the most eligible bachelors in the country—so Lilah had overheard Mr. Everleigh telling his sister recently.

He’s a useless flirt, Miss Everleigh had replied coldly.

As Lilah passed, she caught sight of Palmer’s dimpled smile—undoubtedly flirtatious—and Miss Everleigh’s grimacing reply.

Ha! The viscount would dash himself against those rocks until his bones broke. Gents called Miss Everleigh the “Ice Queen” for a reason. She had no interest in pretty smiles, or human beings, for that matter; art was all she cared for.

Lilah returned her attention to her quarry. Some animal instinct caused the thief to glance up. Their eyes met.

The thief ducked into a salon.

Drat it! Lilah dashed after her. By a statue of Catherine the Great, she caught the girl's elbow, then ducked a slash of nails. "Enough!" She shoved the girl by the shoulders through a set of curtains into a shallow alcove.

The girl punched Lilah in the belly—or tried; there was no muscle to her. Lilah caught her fist and twisted it hard behind the girl's back, jamming it between her scrawny shoulder blades. One good shove slammed the girl against the wall, where she squirmed and hissed like a cat.

"Quiet," Lilah said. "Bleeding fool! Or I'll yell for the police."

The girl's eyes opened wide. "Oo are you? Yer no nob!"

Lilah snorted. A common mistake, expecting to find easy marks in a ballroom. Without ceremony, she groped down the girl's skirts—then made a warning sound as the girl tried to jerk free.

The hidden pocket was poorly disguised. Lilah pulled out a bracelet, a glimmering skein of black pearls and Whitby jet that made her stomach sink. She knew to whom this belonged.

Her expression must have reflected her feelings, for when she glanced up, the urchin went pale. "Please," the girl stammered, "I . . ." She bit her lip and ducked her head, bracing for a blow.

Lilah narrowed her eyes. The girl's freckled cheeks still had the soft fullness of childhood. She could be no older than fifteen, sixteen at the most.

Lilah knew that youth carried no special innocence. At sixteen, a girl could be as wicked as a witch. She had been.

But she reached into her own pocket, regardless.

The girl tensed. What did she anticipate? A knife? Lilah might have shown her one. Old habits died hard; she always went armed.

Instead, she plucked out a coin. "Now listen close," she said. "You've no talent. Hands like hams and a bad instinct for marks."

The girl squinted, her expression doubtful.

"Your life's worth more. Do you hear me? If you're smart, you'll buy a place in a factory. You . . ." She paused, battling the urge to preach onward.

It would do no good. She knew that, too. Sighing, she said, "The choice is yours. Leave now, or get caught." She pressed the coin into the girl's hand. "In five seconds, I call the guards." She turned on her heel and swept out of the alcove, pretending not to notice when the girl dashed by.

At the threshold to the ballroom, Lilah paused. The merry hubbub, the noise and the heat, felt like a solid wall blocking her path. The bracelet in her pocket weighed like an anchor, threatening to drag her down—another unforeseen complication on a night that could not bear any.

Lilah took a deep breath. She stood attired in silk and lace, looking over a crowd of princes and politicians. Some of these rich folk knew her name. They smiled at her when she passed. She had earned her position and finery by honest means.

Look at us now, Fee. So she always thought in such moments. Sometimes she felt—she hoped—that her sister was watching from above, cheering her on. That this triumph was a triumph for them both.

But tonight the sound of the thief's voice was too fresh in her head. Yer no nob. The girl had seen it in an instant. Lilah didn't truly belong here. If this crowd of fine folks learned whose niece she was—and what she'd once done to earn her keep—they would call for her head.

Her uncle would enjoy that. He'd said as much. So you'll do me this small service, Lily—or I'll be glad to tell the Everleighs your true name and family. The choice is yours.

She would do him the service, all right. For two weeks she'd thought of nothing else but how to accomplish it. Tonight was her chance.

But first she had to slip this bracelet back onto Miss Everleigh's wrist. Pasting a smile on her lips, she stepped back into the ballroom.

* * *

The old ache was throbbing through his leg. It did not help that Catherine Everleigh danced like a wood-jointed puppet. Christian could feel her resistance at every step. Had circumstances allowed it, he might have felt sorry for her, so clearly did she wish to be elsewhere. Instead, he registered her reluctance as a minor irritation, easily overcome by brute strength. He pulled her closer on the next turn, ignoring her grimace.

Meanwhile, from the sidelines, her brother, Peter Everleigh, watched with open delight. He was envisioning wedding bells, no doubt, and the subsequent boost to his business.

“The Russian enamels are extraordinary,” Christian said. Catherine had shown him through the collection earlier.

Violet eyes lifted to stare coldly into his. “Was it the enamels that caught your interest? You seemed more taken with the metalwork.”

Yes, he'd spent several minutes staring at a particular piece—a distinctively dented, jewel-encrusted candelabrum more familiar to him from his nightmares.

Bolkhov had come out of the woodwork again. But he'd finally made a mistake. This demented taunt was a clue that might be used to hunt him down.

Amusing to recall: once upon a time, Christian had envisioned a pleasantly ordinary life for himself. A fat military pension. Some rosy, cheerful girl to wed and bed and make children with.

Now his greatest hopes circled on butchering a madman. He lulled himself to sleep at night with fantasies of blood. “Oh, all of the collections intrigue me,” he said to the icy girl in his arms. “But yes, the metalwork is striking. Am I to understand that you had a direct hand in the acquisition?” How well did she know the lunatic who owned that candelabrum? Was she aware that she'd become a pawn in his game?

Somebody squealed nearby. As Catherine glanced toward the merriment, candlelight rippled over her honey-blond hair. Her elegant profile belonged on a cameo. Whatever she saw did not alter her bored expression. "Is it so remarkable?" she asked. "I am, after all, joint proprietor of these auction rooms."

"Much to my good fortune." For until Catherine had sent him the catalog for the upcoming auction, with the candelabrum featured in laboriously painted detail, he'd had no notion of where to look for Bolkhov. His contacts in the War Office had suggested that Bolkhov was dead. That he had never made it to England at all.

That Christian's brother had died of bad luck, rather than murder.

One could dwell on such matters only so long before rage and terror collapsed into something colder and darker. Christian would dance with this girl all night, and make very pleasant conversation, and even marry her if that was what it took to bring Bolkhov's throat under his blade. For he stood to lose everything, otherwise. Everyone.

"Indeed," he said, "I never thanked you properly for my invitation tonight. How did you guess at my interest in the Russian collection?"

"I do not make guesses," she said crisply. "Everleigh's operates on referral."

"Someone referred me, then?"

She sighed, clearly impatient with the need for small talk. "One of the contributors to the upcoming auction."

"Who," he asked, "is this mysterious contributor?"

"He prefers to remain anonymous."

Christian bared his teeth and hoped it passed for a smile. "How inconvenient." Inconveniences abounded of late. The morning after he'd received the catalog, he had forced his mother and sister to cancel their plans for the season. They waited now in Southampton; on Sunday they would embark on an extended tour abroad—New York, Boston, Philadelphia. They would not return until this was over, and Bolkhov was dead. "I don't suppose I can ask you to pass along a note to him?"

"To what end?"

So I can follow you while you deliver it. The vision was vivid. So you can stand by as I slaughter the bastard. "To convey my thanks," he said.

A line appeared between her pale brows. Unlike every other woman in this country, she seemed to find him irritating. "I shall do so in person, then. I cannot be bothered to keep track of notes."

He began to understand why men rarely spoke of Catherine Everleigh's beauty. Astonishing though it was, her charmless nature quite overshadowed it. "Then do tell him how greatly I appreciate it. I hope he plans to attend the auction in June. If so, we'll meet there."

"I'm glad the invitation was welcome to you," she said. "It occurred to me that you might still be in mourning." Her glance flickered down his evening suit, pausing pointedly on the flower pinned to his lapel.

One of the hostesses employed by the auction house had been handing them out at the door. "I can't imagine," she said, staring at the festively beribboned tulip, "how deeply you still grieve. Ten months, has it been?"

The implication being that he had not observed the proper mourning period for his brother. "Fourteen, in fact." Long enough for the pain to dull from a lancing agony to a dull, bone-deep anguish.

But it had sharpened again as he'd stood before that candelabrum tonight. His fury had formed a litany of silent accusation.

You grew careless. You believed that his threats were empty. You thought you were safe.

Geoff is dead because of you.

He forced his thoughts away from that black endless plummet, back to the girl in his arms. She must have seen something that he did not intend to reveal; her frown had taken on a puzzled quality now. "You loved him," she said.

"Of course I loved him." Was she quite right in the head? "He was my brother."

Her mouth twisted. "As if blood were enough to guarantee love."

He took a hard breath, reminding himself of his task here. Catherine Everleigh had no friends. Reticent and withdrawn, she spent her days in dusty attics, poring over other people's treasures. She showed no interest in gentlemen, much less potential confidants.

But she must know Bolkhov, for she was coordinating the sale of that candelabrum. Evidently she anticipated seeing him again. And so Christian's strategy was clear. He must ensure she did not leave his sight. Ideally, he must win her trust and affection, God help him.

The waltz slowed to a conclusion. He stepped back from her, sketching a formal bow before offering his escort off the dance floor. "I suppose I will not see you again until we meet at Buckley Hall."

She paused, a feline quality to her unblinking regard. "Then we will not see each other. My brother has decided to appraise your estate himself. Did you not know?"

"No, I did not." Damn it. That must be what Peter Everleigh wished to speak to him about later. "How curious. I'd understood that he handles the sales, and you, the appraisals."

"Indeed." Her smile looked sour. "That is the typical arrangement. In this case, however, I believe your reputation has won his particular interest. You are, after all, the Hero of Bekhole."

This would not do. Christian had contracted the auction house to handle the sale only because it would give him a chance to keep Catherine in sight. "Would he reconsider his decision?"

Her pause was guarded. "Certainly, if you spoke to him, he might do. I daresay he—" She grabbed his arm for balance as a passerby, a raven-haired woman in a pink gown, stumbled into her.

"Forgive me, Miss Everleigh!" The woman's husky tone and quick curtsy struck Christian as oddly servile.

As she straightened, her glance brushed his, giving him a start. Her eyes belonged to a medieval Madonna. They were round and heavy-lidded, a deep oceanic blue.

“I do hope you are not intoxicated,” Catherine Everleigh said coldly to her.

“No, ma’am.” This time, the woman’s abashed smile was shared with Christian as well. “Only clumsy,” she purred. After bobbing another curtsy, she moved away.

“One of our hostesses,” Catherine said.

“I see.” It occurred to him that an Everleigh Girl, by virtue of her duties, might have cause to know a good deal about Catherine.

“These girls are more trouble than they’re worth,” Catherine went on. “But my brother insists on them.” She paused. “Do you mean to speak with him tonight?”

Christian caught the urgency buried in her question. She wished very much to manage the valuation of his estate. How convenient. “I will find him at once.”

A faint smile escaped her. “Excellent.” She offered a handshake, the gesture businesslike. As she drew away, he noticed something.

“That’s a very fine bracelet you wear,” he said.

“It was my mother’s.”

“Do you always remove it while you dance?”

The small degree of warmth that had crept into her manner now vanished. “I never remove it.”

Then somebody had done so for her—only to put it back again. How peculiar. He looked across the crowd for the dark-haired hostess, eyes narrowing as he found her slipping out the door.

No, not slipping. Sneaking.

Users Review

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