

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved historical dress with a ruffled bodice and a full skirt. She is standing in front of a large, classical-style building with arched windows. The overall color palette is warm and muted, with a pinkish-red tint.

BORN  
of  
*Persuasion*

PRICE  
— of —  
PRIVILEGE  
TRILOGY

JESSICA  
DOTTA

## Praise for Jessica Dotta

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“*Born of Persuasion* is among the best novels I’ve ever read. This allegory is beautifully developed and the story descriptive, suspenseful, and absolutely captivating. Her heroine is flawed and vulnerable and as unsure as the reader of what to believe. Not since *Jane Eyre* have I wanted to reread a story again and again. I fully expect Ms. Dotta to be a bestseller and her work to be counted among the classics of our time.”

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B O R N

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*Persuasion*

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D O T T A

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# One

LATER, WHEN I ALLOWED MYSELF to confront the memories, to dwell on the particulars, I realized my arrival at Am Meer marked the beginning.

Not the mysterious letters that drained the life from Mama.  
Not her suicide.

And not the two men arriving at dusk, stomping mud from their boots in the foyer, bearing ill tidings.

Nay—not even the disconcerting news that I had a guardian, one who intended to keep me sequestered.

For those happenings were not my story. I was sinless there. They were the end result of events set in motion long before I arrived at the cottage. I could no more have stopped their unfolding than I could have prevented my own birth.

Those of you who were alive that year might well remember the early frost of 1838. My arrival coincided with the hardship faced by the farmers that August. Though harvest hadn't quite begun, an overcast sky stretched over the rolling farmlands bringing a reminder of winter's cruel bite. How well I remember

the coach jostling down the familiar lane, its wheels grinding through the familiar ruts. I felt no premonition of danger, only relief, sharp and undefiled. At Am Meer, home of my dearest childhood memories, I hoped to find that which I needed most—a respite between the past and my uncertain future.

The cottage stood beautiful as ever at the end of the pebbly drive. A thick, thatched roof covered grey stone walls with Breton blue shutters. Sleepy sunflowers nodded over amethyst larkspurs. Ivy and roses cambered over the sides of the house, rambling into holly bushes. For the first time in months, happiness swelled within my breast as I spied Mrs. Windham bustling about her herb garden.

Above her, Elizabeth pushed open wooden shutters and leaned over the planter boxes filled with begonias. Her reddish-blonde hair glinted in the sunlight as she watched the coach. Uncertainty passed over her features before she disappeared, leaving the window open.

There was scarce time to notice her dismay, much less interpret it, for the coach braked, swaying me forward. Without waiting for the coachman, I attempted escape and ended up clinging to the nickel-plated handle as I tripped upon layers of petticoats. I hastily wiped away the tears that wet my cheeks.

“Oh, Julia! Oh dear!” Mrs. Windham tottered down the stone pathway, holding scissors aloft. Beneath the crook of one elbow she clutched an oversized basket, and with her free hand, she clutched an apron full of clippings. Breathless, she reached over the wooden gate and unlatched it. Scatterings of rosemary and lavender fell about her feet, scenting the air. “Julia dear, what on earth? Tomorrow, tomorrow, not today. Depend upon you to come early. Oh, and I had such a lovely dinner of stewed pigeon planned, too. Now we shall have to eat rabbit pie and cold beef. Oh, it’s all been ruined.”

Talc filled my senses as she clutched me to her overlarge bosom. I shut my eyes and forced back tears. Too soon, she held

me at arm's length and surveyed me. Wrinkles creased her forehead and her mouth pressed into a firm line. While I had never fulfilled her ideal of beauty—only Elizabeth, a younger version of herself, measured up in that regard—I knew why she frowned. Months of pacing empty rooms stagnant with grief had taken their toll on me.

Since Mama's death, I'd warded off callers, withstood Sarah's fears that our crime would be discovered, and endured endless hours with the parish vicar, who gobbled up a day's worth of food in one sitting as he lectured me on the danger of my eternal damnation.

"Shame on you, Elizabeth." Mrs. Windham twisted and looked over her shoulder as Elizabeth approached. "Hiding Julia's intentions to arrive today. I thought you had outgrown such pranks."

"Mama, surely you don't think I had an idea of this?" Elizabeth laced her fingers together.

I gripped Mrs. Windham's sleeve and silently entreated Elizabeth for news. Words were unnecessary. She knew the information I sought.

Her gaze, however, shifted downwards and focused on a clump of woundwort, which she bent to harvest.

"But, what on . . . ? Julia, where's your carriage?" Mrs. Windham pulled me close and glared at the coachman untying the cords which held my trunks, as if he were to blame for my humble arrival. "Mercy! Tell me you haven't travelled alone. And by coach! I cannot conceive it. Where is Sarah?"

I shook my head. A lump in my throat rendered me unable to speak. Earlier that week, my guardian had discharged the woman who'd first been Mama's nursemaid and then mine.

Elizabeth noticed and took my hand. "How selfish we are. Poor Julia must have travelled through the night. You must feel exhausted."

"Selfish?" Mrs. Windham's chest swelled. "I'll have you

know that I instructed Hannah just today to air my best wedding linens for her room and—”

The driver approached, removing his hat, clearly expecting a tip. Color rose through my cheeks. Though I'd managed my fare yesterday, I had nothing left.

“Harry,” Elizabeth called to the manservant who arrived to carry my trunks. “Run along and fetch a crown for the driver.” Her eyes widened with questions she did not ask. “Come, dearest.”



“I am quite vexed with you.” Mrs. Windham placed a slice of lard cake on a plate. She eyed my dress hanging loosely over my frame, then added another sliver alongside a gooseberry tart. “Why did you not tell us your mother was ailing? Had I knowledge, I would have visited before she passed; indeed, I would have.”

My hand faltered as I reached for the plate. While I'd known the topic of Mama's death was unavoidable, I had not expected it so soon.

“Mama.” Elizabeth cast her mother a disapproving look over the rim of her teacup. “You can scarcely blame Julia for it.”

“Blame Julia?” Mrs. Windham dabbed her eyes with the corner of her gardening apron. “What a notion, child.” Then to me, “Did she linger in much pain? Did she send me remembrances? Did she call for me in her deep despair?”

Tightness gathered in my chest as I sought for an explanation, knowing full well the Windhams wouldn't be fooled into believing Mama had pined herself into an early grave over my father's death.

I placed the plate on my lap, then set about tearing the cake into bite-sized pieces. “She called for no one. The cholera took her quickly.”

Elizabeth froze, midsip, as if detecting my lie. Mrs. Windham frowned, but I wasn't certain whether she sensed deception or

simply disliked being robbed of the notion that Mama had died crying out for her.

Mrs. Windham turned toward the window, pressing her lace handkerchief against her mouth. “Well, if you’re going to try to spare me, I am sure there is nothing I can do.” Her voice trembled. “I have lost my dearest friend, but why should anyone consider me?”

A long silence ensued, during which Elizabeth frowned and I twisted my cup in its saucer. We both knew trying to start a new conversation would be useless until her mother had been properly indulged.

After a minute, Mrs. Windham’s mouth puckered. “Humph. Well, do not think yourself cleared on all accounts. I am even more outraged you agreed to have this . . . this guardian. I scarcely believed my own ears when I heard the tidings. Nothing, no, nothing, could have made me believe you would choose this person over me. Whatever are you thinking?”

I tore the cake into yet smaller pieces.

Elizabeth darted an apologetic look at me, wrapping her hands about her cup. “Mama, you can scarcely blame Julia for whom her parents selected as her guardian.”

“What else am I to think? Especially when Lucy wrote me a mere month before her death begging me to care for Julia should this very thing happen. Well, all I can say is that Julia has certainly made it clear whom she prefers. Surely this person has no tie, no claim over you. I never heard of such an odd thing in all my life. Not give a name, indeed! And that man who came. That rude man! Is it so unreasonable to assume your guardian would have taken it into account that I have a daughter, and as such made allowances? Seen if I merit approval? Of all the insults.” She snorted into her half-empty cup.

I shot Elizabeth a questioning look. She’d not written anything about my guardian sending someone to Am Meer. Instead of meeting my eyes, her gaze drifted to the open windows.

“I never met such a rude man as that Simon.” Looking at my untouched food, Mrs. Windham fluttered her handkerchief at it. “Indeed, I wish we’d begun dining amongst higher spheres before I listed our acquaintances. That would have swept the smug look off that Simon’s face.”

Elizabeth let out a short sigh. “His name was Simmons, not Simon.”

“I think I should remember better than you, missy. I tell you it was Simon, and I cannot imagine a more disdainful or trying butler.”

“Butler?” I asked, more perplexed than ever. “Are you saying my guardian’s butler came here?”

“He was no butler, trust me,” Elizabeth said. “He dressed the part of a gentleman. I think he was a solicitor.”

“You can hardly expect a butler to wear his black tie when travelling. Take my word, the man is a servant, one who holds much too high an opinion of himself.”

“But, Mama, think upon it. What sort of person sends a servant to make those types of inquiries? Who would run the household during his absence?”

“Are you never to tell me of what you are speaking?” I finally said. “What does this man and his lists of acquaintances have to do with my guardian?”

Elizabeth gave her mother a look that plainly asked if she was satisfied now that I was upset. “Well, we were not supposed to mention the visit.” She glared a second longer at her mother. “Three months ago he arrived, stating he’d come to make certain Mama was a suitable chaperone for a visit.”

“Very rude, he was, too. I should not have thought there was such a rude man in all of England.”

Elizabeth took a sharp, annoyed intake of breath. “He gathered the names of all our acquaintances—”

“He dared to ask what we required as compensation for keeping you here for a month or two. The very idea, expecting

to be reimbursed for keeping Lucy's child! He made it sound as though you were living on—" Mrs. Windham stopped suddenly and eyed the patch on my threadbare dress. The tinkling of the wind chimes was the only sound filling the space for a half minute.

"I heard nothing about this visit," I said, forcing an even tone. "Pray, did he happen to mention the name of my guardian?"

"No, indeed. This is all very strange." Mrs. Windham spooned more sugar into her tea. "I think your guardian must be very ill-mannered. What sense can there be in keeping one's identity hidden, I ask?"

She paused, eyeing me for all she was worth. But I had no suitable answer. I no longer even wanted to know about the man who'd been sent here. His visit only increased my unease, making it harder for me to find the nerve to do what I must. If I succeeded in accomplishing my goal, then this Simon or Simmons person mattered little.

A soft knock on the door interrupted us.

"Yes?" Mrs. Windham sank back into her chair, glaring. "What now?"

"I beg pardon." Their stout housekeeper managed to open the door and curtsy at the same time. "Only the room's ready, and Miss Lizbeth asked me to come fetch her."

"Thank you, Hannah." With undisguised relief, Elizabeth stood. "Mama, poor Julia must be exhausted. Surely you will excuse her."

Mrs. Windham waved me away with her handkerchief. "I have no wish to talk further regardless, what with her upsetting the household. My poor heart is pounding after such a distasteful tea. When you wake, I insist you write your guardian. Tell him this whole affair upsets my digestion, and that you wish to be transferred into my care. For I cannot conceive he wishes such vexations upon me. And—"

"What shall we do about a lady's maid for Julia?" Elizabeth

had the mercy to interrupt. “Betsy scarcely has time in the mornings to arrange our toilette, much less someone else’s. What about that girl Nancy?”

“Yes, yes, anyone will do,” agreed Mrs. Windham, picking up her teacup. “I am quite certain Julia shall not mind.”



That night, I startled from my dreams to the sound of rain slashing against the window. I blinked at the tall furniture casting long shadows over the bed, trying to reorient myself. Then recalling I was safe at Am Meer, I turned over.

I’d slept long past the hour of dinner, evidenced by the plate of food next to my bedside. My stomach soured as I evaluated its contents. The hare had dried and shrunk from the bone. Granules of fat clung to the potatoes, and what looked like a petrified lump of dough served for bread.

I wrinkled my nose, sliding from the crumpled bed linens. My nightgown and hair were damp from perspiration, so I took up the heavy, woollen shawl draped over the end of the bed.

The dreams were always the same—wraithlike visions of Mama, tortured and frenzied in the netherworld, trying to warn me from across a vast chasm.

I sank before the expiring coals and rested my head against the cool fireplace tiles. Though I never heard what Mama was trying to tell me, I didn’t need to. I tightened my shawl recalling my last visit to Am Meer, three years previous.

And how very different that trip was.

Mama had been with me, head high and erect. I suffered no anxiety for my future then, no fears or rejection. Instead, I felt certain of what was to come. I’d begun wearing stays, which decreased my waist size, enhancing my femininity. My hair was swept up and coiled in glossy, thick locks. At fourteen, I was old enough to be wed. Certainly old enough to enter a betrothal, which had already been promised me when I reached this age.

Poor Mama never suspected my exhilaration had little to do with Am Meer. How placidly she watched the sheep grazing over the windswept hills, her eyes seemingly fixed, her thoughts spreading far from me.

Our carriage had scarcely arrived before Elizabeth tore from the cottage and sprinted down the flagstone path. Crimson ribbons freed themselves from her hair as she ran.

“Julia! Julia! Oh, Julia!” She grabbed my hands, knocking me off balance, then swung me around and back to my place. Excitement flushed her cheeks as she bounced up and down on her toes. “Oh, you’ll never guess. You cannot guess!”

With a slight smile, Mama shook the dust from her skirts.

My heart pounded, for I knew by the gleam in Elizabeth’s eyes her news had to do with our favorite topic—Lord Auburn’s sons. I gave her a slight, panicked shake of my head, which she failed to note.

“Edward . . . learned of your arrival.” She paused to catch her breath, and as she did, she grinned—a grin only achieved by youth unaware of how quickly hopes can be blighted.

With a look of horror, Mama froze. Until that moment, I’d taken great pains to keep her from suspecting my attachment to Edward, the younger son. Our lazy afternoons had been kept far from prying eyes in leafy, cool coppices. The hours had been private ones, dwindled away chatting, safe within haystacks, or with our bare feet dipped in the icy waters of gushing brooks.

Elizabeth pumped my hands to bring my attention back to her. “Edward postponed a visit to his aunt—and she’s a viscountess, too—simply refused to go, to make certain he saw you. He said to tell you he had something important to discuss.” Her voice rose with excitement as she said the last line. “Had you seen the look on his face, there can be no doubt, none whatsoever, what he intends to ask. If we go now, right now, I bet we can find both Henry and Edward in the village.”

Doubtless, Elizabeth would have riven me from Am Meer

and had me flying down the lane had not Mama's hands clutched my shoulders.

"My word," she said, sounding as if she'd been struck and could scarcely breathe.

The weight of my betrayal increased as I drew my eyes up to her, but she was not looking at me. Her face, emptied of color, turned toward Mrs. Windham. Though Mama kept her voice pleasing, an intense shudder rippled through her arms as she tightened her grip on me. "Edith, surely you knew nothing of this. The girls are far too old for such antics. There might be rumors, misunderstandings."

I could scarcely draw breath. My only hope lay with Mrs. Windham, which did not promise much. Poor Mrs. Windham. At that time, her highest ambition was to keep Elizabeth's name linked with the Auburns'. She looked nearly as dismayed as I felt.

"Well, upon my word, Lucy," was all she managed at first, tottering to join us. "Surely no one would mistake children . . ." Ill-advisedly, she gestured to Elizabeth, whose panting chest filled out her dress rather well. Mrs. Windham must have thought so too, for she frowned and quickly turned in my direction. Her eyes darted up and down my flat bodice before fluttering the lace she clutched in her hand toward me. "They are mere children. Who could possibly mistake their capers for more than that?"

"Mr. Henry Auburn is nineteen now, is he not?" Mama's voice was steel.

Elizabeth, impatient to be off, rolled her eyes. Mama had never stood in her way; therefore she could not perceive the storm gathering above us.

"Well . . . as I breathe," Mrs. Windham said, "I am sure I cannot recount Master Henry's age. Certainly he cannot be—" her face drooped—"as old as all that."

"Elizabeth?" Mama's voice took on a crisp tone.

The impatience drained from my friend's countenance as realization sank in. Her face turned scarlet. "Ma'am?"

“How old is Master Henry?” Mama did not ask Edward’s age, for I think even then she could not bring herself to speak his name.

Elizabeth glanced at me for help. I felt like crying. Our perfect afternoons were ending, and there was nothing I could do.

“He is nineteen, ma’am.”

“Ah.” Mama fixed her stony gaze on Mrs. Windham. Her disapproval chilled even the misty air. “Surely you knew nothing of this scheme.”

Mrs. Windham blinked as her mind absorbed the abrupt change. When Mama arched her eyebrows, Mrs. Windham seized her only chance of separating herself.

“Upon my word, Elizabeth.” She grabbed Elizabeth’s upper arm and walloped her through her thick petticoats, propelling her toward the house. “Such notions! Such carrying on! Such a thing I would not have imagined from you.” She looked over her shoulder at Mama. “I had not thought she would suggest such a brazen act. Go find the Auburns in the village, indeed.” She raised her hand and larruped Elizabeth’s backside. “Get in the house! Do not let me hear one peep out of you. Of all the indecent, bald-faced . . .”

Elizabeth wore too many petticoats to be much disturbed. She cast me a determined look that promised we would see Henry and Edward this summer, no matter what.

Mama caught her meaning too, for her hand stopped trembling on my shoulder. From that moment forward, she became my jailor. Gone were my afternoon walks and Elizabeth’s and my trips to the village, where we wove through the merchant stalls and cried out greetings to those amongst our class.

Mama found excuses not to visit Am Meer thereafter. The horse had clubfoot. The rain made it too muddy for safe passage. We needed to tend our garden. Her excuses were as lame as she claimed our horse was.

Mrs. Windham faithfully sent her yearly invitation, and

pain creased Mama's face as she read each missive. Not even a stranger would have mistaken Tantalus's hunger in her eyes. To this day I ache when I consider the cruelty she endured to keep me from Edward—the drunken rages, the swift, savage hand of my father. She could have escaped, spent her summer afternoons sewing in peace amongst Mrs. Windham's roses. But Mama held firm to her belief that Edward would devastate my life. Of all people, Mama should have known that we have no control over fate, not even our own.

Her efforts were vain, regardless. For despite her keeping me under lock and key during our last visit to Am Meer, Edward had managed to find me.

My faith in Edward had been so strong that even the afternoon I learned I had a guardian, I scarcely listened to his terms. That afternoon, I still had not been able to weep over Mama's death, as it was self-inflicted. I walked in a blur. Thus when Mr. Graves, my solicitor, informed me I had a guardian who intended to send me to Scotland as a widow's companion, I sat expressionless as he read my guardian's instructions.

My calm must have disturbed him, for when he finished he looked over the page and frowned. "Did you understand any of what I just read?"

"I understood." I kept my hands folded on my lap, refusing to change expression.

He clearly hadn't expected this, for he paused, looking annoyed.

I swallowed hard, wondering what a normal response was. Did he expect me to object to my lower status? Was I supposed to weep and wail? Or was he waiting for me to thank my guardian profusely for overseeing my future?

Twice Mr. Graves cleared his throat, an indicant he wished me to speak. Tugging his cravat, he stared, waiting. "Well, haven't you anything to say?" he finally demanded.

A slow smirk crept over my lips as I fought the urge to shriek

with laughter. *Say?* I mused. When had it ever mattered what I said? My words were as empty as air. No one consulted me about concealing Mama's suicide, addressed the cost of the funeral, or even bothered to tell me that should my parents die, I'd have a guardian. No, I would not speak. I'd learned early that women did not escape their bonds. But neither would I thank my guardian. I would do nothing except sit here, hands folded.

Mr. Graves was not a particularly insightful personality. Instead of recognizing someone worn down from grief, he saw a girl who smirked when he didn't want her to. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Well—" he stood, stuffing papers back in his bag—"I'll take my leave, then."

I remained motionless until his footsteps died. Even as fear slowly curled through my body, a ray of sun sliced through the dust and landed near my feet. It was as warm and shining as my last hope—Edward.

The smattering of rain on the panes recalled me to Am Meer. I shook off the shawl and pattered to the bed, where my satchel lay. Stashed within the first compartment was the portrait of the life Mama had left me.

The page had come to me during the last meeting with Mr. Graves. When he stood to leave, it fluttered unnoticed to the floor. It had taken all my effort not to stare at it as he turned and walked from the room.

I opened the paper that I had folded and refolded so often the words had rubbed clean in the creases and could only be read from memory.

As far as I could tell, the letter was written to my guardian and discussed the conditions of my going to Scotland. It read:

*... for if she's unused to Scotland's damp air, I daresay,  
she'll suffer without proper wool, boots, and cape.*

*Also, it is imperative the girl remains in full mourning.  
Mother and I are most severe upon this point. Your charge*



*likely expects to make the transition into second mourning before her arrival. But such frivolity will little suit her life with us.*

*You wrote that you are concerned about whom the girl associates with. Allow me to assure you, neither Mother nor I tolerate intermingling amongst the classes. I do not encourage those beneath our station to look above their rank. In the rare event of guests, Mother will especially require the girl's presence in the sickroom. Naturally, the same level of expectation shall continue where the staff is concerned—no mingling shall be tolerated. When Mama is sleeping, I personally shall make certain the girl's free time is filled with useful employment lest she grow lazy and idle.*

*While I'm on this topic, Isaac wrote that she's to be given a small allowance at your expense—enough to content the feminine mind. Sir, I cannot disagree more heartily with him upon the matter, and implore you trust my opinion as a woman over his. He is much deceived as to the nature of females. Not a single woman amongst my acquaintance defines her happiness as stemming from the substance of things. It would be a dangerous precedent to set. Your protégé would needlessly spoil the girl, and with it, give her an air of discontentment. If she is penniless, work alone secures her future. If she is friendless, let discipline structure her thoughts. She must be taught that only through usefulness shall she find security. This offers her far greater contentment than mere baubles. Indeed, I have often observed—*

Whatever had been observed, I thankfully was spared from learning. The page ended.

I clutched the note against my stomach, glad for the lingering hours before dawn. Every time I read the letter, fear assailed me. Much depended upon the next few weeks of my life. My

guardian had given me two months before I left for Scotland. If I were to find a husband first, I needed to act quickly.

My summers at Am Meer had always been interludes of peace, golden drafts of mead. The halcyon summer days blended with country dances, laughter, and girlish dreams. And Edward had always occupied the center.

Now he was all I had left.

A child's whimsy.

One that I desperately needed to make real.

# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



SOME STORIES insist upon being written. This is one of them. When I first started writing this book, I was nineteen. My intent was to tell a story about a Victorian girl who unexpectedly falls in love while visiting a Gothic estate. It didn't take me long to realize the true story was happening behind the scenes—and it was far more sinister. I liked what I had written, but I didn't see how *that* story fit into a Christian worldview. So I set it aside.

Yet the story haunted me. Over the next decade, each time I sat down to write, no matter what I intended to put on paper, I always ended up sketching a quick vignette about that girl, or the estate, or about the other characters. In my late twenties, I realized if I was ever going to write anything else, I needed to get this story out of my system, so I began in earnest. This time, I incorporated God into the picture and began to see spiritual themes developing too. As I wrote, I shared my work with my sister-in-law and my best friend. They grew so interested that they encouraged me to get it published. Little did we know it would take still another decade to learn the craft, the industry, and the necessary marketing skills.

During these years, the story has gone through several transitions. At times, the faith element has been too strong, while

at other times it's been buried except through symbolism. It's always been Gothic. After many years of working on this story and these characters, I'm thrilled that this book is now finally in your hands.

Please feel free to contact me via my website,  
[www.jessicadotta.com](http://www.jessicadotta.com).

Blessings,  
Jessica