

A MATCH
of WITS



JEN TURANO



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2014 by Jennifer L. Turano

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turano, Jen.

A match of wits / Jen Turano.
pages cm

Summary: "Zayne and Agatha have always been a match in wits, but will unlikely circumstances convince them they could also be a match made in heaven as they return home to 1880s New York City?"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1127-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Couples—Fiction. 2. New York (N.Y.)—History—1865–1898—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3620.U7455M38 2014

813'.6—dc23

2014003688

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by John Hamilton Design

Author represented by The Seymour Agency

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Dominic

I've watched you turn into an
extraordinary young man, Dom,
which, quite honestly, has surprised me
upon occasion given that you were
such a terror in your youth.
Since I know you loathe anything of a
mushy nature, I'll keep this simple—
I'm incredibly proud to call you my son.

Love you always,
Mom



COLORADO—LATE SEPTEMBER 1883

Sometimes, no matter how independent and self-assured a young lady believes herself to be, certain situations demand a good dose of screaming.

Dropping her traveling bag to the floor, Miss Agatha Watson snapped her mouth shut when she realized her shrieks were hurting her ears and took a hesitant step forward. For some reason, there was a blanket scooting her way, but what was underneath that blanket, well, she couldn't actually say.

Her heart continued pounding in her chest when the blanket moved closer, but when an adorable little pig popped out her lips curled into a grin.

“Aren't you just the most darling thing ever, but . . . good heavens, is that foam dripping from your snout?” Backing up a step, she considered the pig, and her eyes widened when it began pawing the ground, right before it charged directly at her. Spinning on her heel, she raced out the door, fresh screams erupting from her lips.

The hallway soon filled with employees of the Antlers Hotel. But rather than coming to her aid, they thundered past with barely a glance tossed her way. Stopping in her tracks, she turned and watched in dumbfounded amazement as the employees hovered around the pig.

It was an odd circumstance to be sure.

“What did you do to poor Matilda?” one of the hotel maids demanded as she straightened and sent Agatha a glare.

“I think a more pertinent question would be what Matilda did to me. There I was, tired from my journey and looking forward . . .” Agatha’s words trailed off when she glanced to the pig and found that the fierce beast of only a moment before was nowhere to be found. In its place was a quivering mass of pink cuteness that was emitting noises that almost sounded like sobs.

Edging back down the hallway, Agatha stopped a few feet away from the gathered employees but far enough from the pig that, if it decided to attack, she’d have enough room to bolt. “As I was saying, I really didn’t do anything to the pig other than open my door and take it by surprise.”

“Better watch the P-I-G word, Miss,” a lanky man with rather bad skin said as he rose to his feet. “Matilda doesn’t react very well when people call her that.”

“I highly doubt she understands the meaning of words.”

Shaking his head, the man lowered his voice. “Strange as this may seem, she does, at least the P-I-G word. I think someone must have abused her mightily in the past, and she thinks bad things are going to happen to her when that word is used.”

“How unusual. I—” Agatha began, but a loud clearing of a throat distracted her from the numerous questions she’d immediately longed to ask regarding the pig and its abil-

ity to comprehend words. Knowing all too well who was responsible for that particular clearing of a throat—something she'd heard on an alarmingly frequent basis over the past year—she squared her shoulders and swung around. Her gaze reluctantly locked with that of Mr. Blackheart, the gentleman who'd been hired to protect her.

Unfortunately, he was not gazing back at her with understanding on his face. His expression was filled with nothing less than clear disapproval, a look she was becoming quite accustomed to viewing. The thought flashed to mind that she just might have to send a telegram to Mr. Theodore Wilder, the most reputable private investigator in all of New York and Mr. Blackheart's employer, requesting a change of guard. The months she'd spent in Mr. Blackheart's company were beginning to take a toll on her. And even though she knew full well she needed someone by her side as she traveled around the West in pursuit of articles for the *New-York Tribune*, Mr. Blackheart's time with her might need to come to an end.

There was only so much disapproval a lady should be expected to experience.

"Miss Watson," Mr. Blackheart began, "explain to me, if you please, how you've managed to become embroiled in yet another bout of calamity. I left you alone for only a miniscule amount of time while I saw Mrs. Swanson settled, and yet here you are in trouble again."

"Honestly, Mr. Blackheart, it's not as if every calamity that occurs is of my making. If it has escaped your notice, there seems to be a mad pig in our midst, one that I'm fairly certain was intent on harming my person."

Mr. Blackheart switched his attention to Matilda. "It's only a small pig. What did you expect it to do to you—gnaw off a toe or perhaps nuzzle you with its snout?"

Agatha lifted her chin. “It’s frothing at the mouth.”

“You naughty girl,” the man with splotchy skin crooned as he shook his finger at Matilda. “You’ve been in the chalk again I see.”

Agatha blinked. “She’s been eating chalk, as in blackboard chalk?”

The maid who was still hovering over Matilda nodded. “We were concerned when we learned the teacher staying in your room was allowing Matilda to eat it, but the little darling seems to love it. Once it became clear she wasn’t getting sick, we stopped fussing about it. They seemed to be getting along so well, but the teacher up and departed this morning, and she actually balked at our suggestion she take Matilda with her.”

“I wonder why?” Agatha asked, glancing down at the drooling pig that was now rooting around the floor, obviously searching for something else to eat.

“I have no idea,” the maid replied before she gave a sad shake of her head. “But if someone doesn’t offer to take her soon, I’m afraid she’s destined for the slaughterhouse.”

At that pronouncement, Matilda stopped rooting, began quivering harder than ever, let out a mournful squeal, and promptly scampered back into Agatha’s room.

“I take it she has an issue with the word *slaughterhouse* as well?” Agatha asked, and the employees nodded back at her. Curiosity sent her after the pig, and she grinned when she spotted a wiggly pig tail sticking out from under the bed. Finding herself charmed in spite of the fact the pig had scared her senseless only moments before, she moved farther into the room but came to an abrupt halt when a distinctly disgruntled voice sounded from behind her.

“Do not even tell me that pig is still here.”

She looked up and discovered Mr. Farrington, the manager of the hotel, marching her way. He brushed past her and seemed to swell on the spot when he caught sight of Matilda's backside, which had stopped wiggling. He turned around and narrowed his eyes at his employees.

"Well?" he demanded. "Would someone care to explain why that pig is not yet off to a farm?"

"Matilda doesn't actually care for farms," a maid mumbled.

"Did she tell you of her dislike?" Mr. Farrington asked.

"Not exactly, but you see, I tried to take her out to old Mr. Galloway's homestead, sir, but . . ."

"But what?"

"She turned up back here a few hours later." The woman's eyes grew round. "It was truly remarkable that a little thing like Matilda was even up for such a long journey."

A tic began throbbing on Mr. Farrington's temple before he looked back at Agatha. "You must accept my deepest apologies, Miss Watson. Pigs are not a normal occurrence here, but I'm certain it was quite the shock to find a pig in your room. I'll have another room readied straightaway. And while that's being taken care of, I'd like to offer you a complimentary meal in our fine dining room. By the time you're finished eating, I can guarantee your new room will be perfect, and I assure you, you'll not see that abomination again."

Noticing the telling glare Mr. Farrington was sending Matilda's way, Agatha's heart gave a tiny lurch. The poor pig was now trying to squeeze under the bed—a futile attempt if there ever was one, because its backside was much too large. "Forgive me, but I have to ask, what are your intentions for the pig?"

A snort of obvious protest erupted from under the bed.

Mr. Farrington licked his lips. "I enjoy a nice slice of ham

upon occasion, and since no one seems to want to take responsibility for the pig, well . . .”

Matilda let out a high-pitched squeal right as she finally managed to disappear from view.

Uncomfortable with the thought of Mr. Farrington serving Matilda for dinner, Agatha opened her mouth, but before she could utter a single word, Mr. Blackheart gripped her arm. He pulled her across the room at a rapid clip, pausing for only a second to scoop up her bag from the floor with his free hand. Tugging her past the employees, who were now muttering not very nice things about her under their breaths, Mr. Blackheart hustled her down the long hallway without speaking so much as a single word. Digging in her heels right before they reached the stairs, she forced the infuriating gentleman to a stop.

“Mr. Blackheart, after all the time we’ve been forced to spend together over the past year I understand that you’re the strong, silent type, but what has gotten into you? Those people must believe you’ve taken leave of your senses, hauling me away in such a roughshod fashion.”

Mr. Blackheart fixed his piercing blue eyes on her and released a grunt.

That was it—a single grunt.

Why in the world did so many gentlemen who spent time in her company resort to that particular response? Did they assume she understood the language of grunting, and if so, was it expected she’d respond in kind?

She shook out of his hold, crossed her arms over her chest, let out a grunt of her own, and began tapping her toe against the wooden floor.

Mr. Blackheart looked at the floor, watched her feet as she

began tapping faster, and then raised his gaze before he rolled his eyes—an action that sufficiently summed up their relationship.

It was quickly becoming evident she'd annoyed the gentleman once again, but she truly couldn't think of anything she'd done that warranted his displeasure. Besides, even if she *had* done something—which, again, she hadn't—he was paid well to watch over her. Sending annoyance her way on a regular basis wasn't in his job description.

Why, he was beginning to remind her more and more of Zayne Beckett. . . . No, she was not going to allow herself to travel down *that* memory lane.

“ . . . it was yet another disaster waiting to happen.”

Blinking, Agatha realized that, while she'd been reminiscing on matters best left forgotten, Mr. Blackheart had evidently put his grunting aside and was now voicing another complaint.

“I beg your pardon?” she forced herself to ask, earning a scowl from Mr. Blackheart in the process.

“I *said* we barely averted another disaster. I saw the expression on your face when you heard that pig was about to get served up for supper. I'm telling you right now, I did not sign up to look after you, Mrs. Swanson, *and* a pig.”

“I don't cause disasters on a regular basis,” she said before she swept past him and began moving down the stairs.

Mr. Blackheart caught up with her all too quickly. “What about the cattle wranglers?”

“Complete misunderstanding.”

“You set their chuck wagon on fire.”

“I didn't do it on purpose.” Agatha reached the bottom step and paused to get her bearings.

“Be that as it may, your actions caused a flaming catastrophe.”

Agatha bit her lip. “I don’t think I’ve ever ridden a horse so fast in my life.”

“Having twenty hungry and enraged cowboys chasing you does lend a certain motivation for spurring a horse forward.”

“At least I got a riveting story out of the ordeal, one that was incredibly well received by the readers and earned me an award from the *New-York Tribune*.”

Mr. Blackheart arched a brow. “We almost lost our lives.”

“But we didn’t, so winning the award was delightful for me.”

“What did I get from the fiasco?”

“I would think you got satisfaction from the mere fact you were able to keep me alive. There’s nothing quite like a job well done to give a person a deep sense of contentment.”

Mr. Blackheart’s other brow joined the first, and he stared at her for a moment before taking a firm grip of her arm and prodding her faster than necessary down the hallway. They entered a large room filled with tables draped in fine linen, and Agatha looked around in surprise.

“I was expecting rustic with perhaps a few spurs tossed around for decoration,” she said. “This is a dining room one might see in a big city.”

“And you’re disappointed about that, aren’t you?” Mr. Blackheart didn’t bother to wait for her to respond and began walking around the room, giving the patrons who were dining there a quick once-over before he rejoined her. “It looks relatively safe, but I’m hesitant to leave you by yourself. It’s unfortunate that Mrs. Swanson is feeling poorly and can’t join you.”

“Really, Mr. Blackheart, you’re being overly protective, and while it’s true that Mrs. Swanson normally joins me to dine, she is only my companion. She is paid to accompany me, not

protect me. I hardly believe if a troubling situation were to occur, she'd be much assistance." She gestured around the room. "As you said, it seems perfectly respectable here, and I'll be fine. It's not as if I'll be dining alone in one of those questionable establishments down in Colorado City."

Mr. Blackheart stiffened right before he narrowed his eyes. "We are *not* going to Colorado City."

Agatha narrowed her eyes right back at him. "I don't see why not. From what I've been told, it's a seedy town, and the brothels alone would make wonderful fodder for an article. Why, I could tie in the information I uncovered regarding the New York brothels and write a story comparing the brothels in the East and those in the West."

"Have you forgotten that the major reason you were forced to leave New York and go on this *delightful* western journey was because someone wants to see you dead, someone who might be connected with the New York brothels?"

"My memory is fine, thank you very much, and I wasn't forced out of New York. If you'll recall, my editor was already making plans for someone to travel out here to gather feature stories. He thought I was exactly the right journalist for the job."

"No, he didn't. He only suggested you take on the assignment after the threats to you began to escalate. If I remember correctly, another journalist was supposed to make the trip—a Mr. Pitkin, I think, who was not exactly happy to have been replaced by you."

Giving an airy wave of her hand, Agatha smiled. "Mr. Pitkin was perfectly fine with the decision, especially after he learned how dangerous the environment can be out here. He never struck me as an overly brave sort."

"Then it was probably to his benefit to remain behind, but

that has nothing to do with your getting it into your head to travel to Colorado City. It's much too dangerous. And since I *have* been hired to keep you alive, I'm going to have to put my foot down and tell you here and now that we won't be traveling there . . . ever."

"It's not like I intentionally seek out dangerous situations."

"Miss Watson, intentional or not, you have a concerning ability to land in dangerous predicaments, and those predicaments are indeed the reasoning behind our taking this extended western journey. Not only are the madams of all the brothels furious with you, you've also incurred the wrath of a shirtwaist factory owner, the tenement slum lords, the sewage disposal authorities, the men who've taken issue over your support of laws concerning the power husbands hold over their wives, and . . . Well, I could go on and on. I'd prefer not to ignite those particular bad feelings toward you out here. My job of keeping you alive will become incredibly difficult if the entire country wants to see you dead."

"Don't you think you're exaggerating a touch?"

"No."

Agatha lifted her chin. "It's not as if all of those people are aware I'm the person behind the Alfred Wallenstate articles. Most readers assume my stories are penned by a man."

"Someone evidently figured it out, since threats started showing up at your New York residence." Mr. Blackheart looked over her shoulder. "Ah, here comes the waiter. I suppose this lovely conversation we're having will have to come to an end, and just when I was beginning to enjoy myself immensely."

"May I show you to a table for two?" the waiter asked with a glare at Agatha.

"I think everyone might be blaming me for Matilda's fate,"

she muttered. “Which means it might not be a good idea for me to eat here.”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Blackheart replied. “No one blames you for Matilda’s fate. And just so we’re clear, we’re not going to rush in and save her.”

He looked at the waiter and scowled. “I expect Miss Watson to be served a delicious meal, without a side of guilt, if you please, but since I won’t be joining her, she’ll only need a table for one. I need to ascertain no other farm animals will be showing up in her room and check on Mrs. Swanson, who seems to be suffering from the altitude, but do know that I will be stopping by every so often to make sure Miss Watson is staying out of trouble.”

The waiter turned pale and nodded.

“There’s no need to intimidate the poor man, Mr. Blackheart. And if you’re so concerned about my getting into trouble, perhaps you should join me.”

“While that does sound truly enjoyable, I prefer to dine alone . . . in my room, after I get you settled for the night.” He turned around and strode away, leaving her standing beside the waiter, who was looking a little sulky.

“I wouldn’t mind a table by the window,” she finally said.

A minute later, she wasn’t sitting at a table by the window or even at a table in the dining room. Instead, she was squished into a less-than-comfortable seat in a darkened corner of what appeared to be the hotel’s pub. She looked around, delighted that the waiter had left her in a much more interesting spot than the dining room—not that he probably intended that result.

When her gaze settled on what appeared to be a mountain man sitting at the bar, her delight increased. Two ladies were sitting on either side of him with another leaning across the

bar, all three ladies giving the man their undivided attention as they laughed uproariously over something he'd just said.

Her writer instincts kicked in.

Why would a man who was garbed in ratty old clothing and certainly hadn't seen a barber in the recent past attract the attention of ladies, and what was he doing in a reputable hotel?

A panicked squeal immediately distracted her from the mountain man. Leaning forward, she peered through an open door and watched as little Matilda scurried into view, running as fast as her stumpy legs would allow, with Mr. Farrington's yells sounding in the distance.

The sight of the obviously frantic pig caused Agatha's stomach to clench, and she simply couldn't sit idly by and watch what she knew was about to happen. "Matilda, over here," she called, and the pig barreled rapidly in her direction. Not giving herself a moment to think through what she was about to do, she hitched up her skirt. Matilda needed no other encouragement to scurry underneath it. She'd just managed to drop her skirt into place when Mr. Farrington darted into the room. Picking up a menu from the table, she breathed a sigh of relief when he rushed past her.

The question that remained was how to proceed?

The decision was made for her when Matilda plopped her solid body down on Agatha's shoes and seemed to settle in for the duration. Trying to shift in her seat, but finding that next to impossible with a pig lounging on her feet, Agatha ducked her head under the table. "Would it be possible for you to move just the tiniest bit, because . . ." Her words died in her throat when the sound of a gentleman's voice unexpectedly captured her attention.

"We need another round over here when you get a minute."

Lifting her head, she winced when she hit it against the edge of the table. She knew that voice as well as she knew her own, but . . . it made no sense.

Zayne Beckett would have no reason to be in Colorado Springs. He was supposed to be happily married by now and living with his lovely if overly delicate wife, Helena, in California.

Rubbing the sore spot on her head, she glanced around, breathing a sigh of relief when none of the gentlemen sitting at the other tables turned out to be Zayne. The only gentleman whose face she couldn't see was that of the mountain man, but he certainly wasn't cause for concern. Zayne had always been a meticulous dresser, something that couldn't be said for the man hunched over the bar. That man was dressed in a jacket covered with bits of what looked like dirt and leaves, his boots were caked with mud, and there was a ratty old cane perched by his side, giving testimony to the fact that he probably was not in the best of health. He also possessed a headful of matted and incredibly long dark hair, while Zayne's hair had always been perfectly groomed, except for the occasional times she'd gotten him involved in something . . . messy.

Forcing her attention back to the menu, she perused her options, wondering if she should choose the buffalo soup or . . .

"Ladies, after this drink, I'm calling it a night," the man at the bar proclaimed. His words sounded just the tiniest bit slurred, but . . . he sounded exactly like Zayne.

He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills, which he promptly thrust at the employee tending the bar. "Here's to settle the bill, and keep the change for your efforts,"

The money certainly explained the ladies surrounding him,

but she was at a loss as to why the man sounded so eerily like Zayne.

Curiosity kept her watching the man. He lifted his arm, tilted his head back, and downed a glass of what appeared to be whiskey in one gulp. Releasing a loud belch, he turned.

All the breath squeezed out of Agatha's lungs as her gaze met his. She wouldn't have recognized him if it weren't for his eyes, but those eyes were something Agatha had never been able to forget. They were a distinctive shade of green, much like the grass in springtime, and they were usually filled with mischief.

But there was no mischief in the eyes currently narrowed on her.

Mr. Zayne Beckett stared at her for what seemed like forever, and then he smiled a lopsided smile. "Aggie."

He'd never once, in all the time she'd known him, called her Aggie.

Before she could summon up a single word of response, he lurched off the stool, his leg seemed to give out, and Zayne Beckett—the one gentleman who plagued her thoughts on an almost daily basis—plummeted to the ground even as his eyes rolled back in his head, and a cloud of dirt puffed up from his clothing.