

A NOVEL OF BEST LAID PLANS
— ONE —

To
CATCH
a
CORONET

GRACE HITCHCOCK



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

To Catch a Coronet

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Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505. www.kregel.com.

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Cover design by Faceout Studio.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Name: Hitchcock, Grace, author.

Title: To catch a coronet / Grace Hitchcock.

Description: First edition. | Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2024. |

Series: Best Laid Plans; book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2023043381 (print) | LCCN 2023043382 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3608.I834 T6 2024 (print) | LCC PS3608.I834 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231004

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023043381>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023043382>

ISBN 978-0-8254-4809-6, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-7086-8, epub

ISBN 978-0-8254-6987-9, Kindle

Printed in the United States of America

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 / 5 4 3 2 1

For Charlie, Sammy, and Eli.

*Having a sister who writes romance is a dangerous thing—
a dedication to you was bound to happen. Love you!*

Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me,
 bless his holy name. . . .
Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth
 thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies.
 PSALM 103:1, 4

Chapter One

Chilham, April 1813

“TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT!” MURIEL Beau held up the gold band, admiring the ring in the flickering candelabras of the powder room just off the assembly hall’s ballroom. The piece was simple, but her dear Baron Deverell would appreciate that she had chosen to present him with her family’s one and only heirloom. He would treasure it as much as she had.

“Muriel, this is mad—even for you. You cannot seriously be considering going through with this?” Vivienne Poppy pressed a gloved hand on either side of the threshold to block the doorway that led to Muriel’s happily ever after.

Muriel slipped her father’s ring onto her gloved thumb. “After having two fiancés arranged for me by my well-meaning parents, each of whom I unfortunately had to release from his promise due to our lack of affection for one another, among other things, I finally have the courage I need to rise to the occasion. I will have no more of this endless cycle of waiting and hoping, followed by nearly unbearable disappointment.”

Vivienne sagged against the doorframe. “I know you were disheartened in your previous matches—”

“Disheartened? One gentleman was in love with another lady, and I overheard the other tell his friends he was embarrassed to have me by his side, but my dowry was so significant that he would overlook his discomfort. So, yes, I’d say I was disappointed, at the least.” As always,

Muriel shielded herself from the memories and instead focused on the ring and all the joy it promised.

“I know, but please stop and think. Even though you were not born into your position, you know as well as I that this is not how it is done in polite society. What if Baron Deverell rejects your proposal? What then? How will you salvage your pride? Your reputation?”

Muriel twirled in the mottled looking glass, admiring her empire-waist gown that complimented her petite and full figure, pausing only to adjust her short pink slashed sleeves with their tufts of white crepe and silver bands. “He won’t. My Deverell hasn’t spoken of marriage yet because he is only wishing to make certain of my feelings, what with me practically jilting two of his acquaintances. What man would want to propose to a woman who might cry off the wedding? Well, I *am* certain about him, and Baron Osmund Deverell will know my true feelings before this evening’s end.”

Vivienne pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. “Which are?”

“That I love him, and I would *never* jilt him. We are meant to be together, and it is time I take control of my future and cease this ever-pressing need to please the beast that is society.” Her pulse raced with the awareness that all the dreams she had long held dear—of being loved and accepted by a handsome gentleman despite her rough tendencies—were only a proposal away if only she had the courage to act.

Vivienne released a weighted sigh and grasped Muriel’s hand in her own. “While I appreciate your quoting my own novel to me, it does not mean I agree with you in this instance. This is not one of my works of fiction, wherein grand gestures always result in a favorable outcome. If you *must* ask the baron to marry you, at least ask him in private. If it is a chaperone you are needing, I humbly offer my services in place of the ballroom full of witnesses.”

She threw her arms around her dear friend, giggling. “Cease your worrying. He won’t reject me! And a departure from the rules requires a grand gesture for all to accept it. Trust me, Vivienne, this

will be so romantic, you'll be writing your next novel based on our love story."

Vivienne groaned and stepped aside. "I certainly hope so and pray the baron answers favorably, for your sake as well as your family's."

"If I wasn't certain of his affections, I would not ask." Muriel twisted the ring around her thumb, her heart hammering. Good thing she was wearing gloves. Her hands were sweating profusely. But she supposed any lady would be perspiring when the gentleman of her dreams was about to kiss her for the first time. In all these months of courting, she thought Baron Deverell would at least *attempt* to kiss her cheek. Well, after the romantic proposal she had planned for tonight, he would be so moved and convinced of her affections he would no longer be so reserved. He would kiss her in front of all, effectively silencing the disapproving society matrons with his devotion.

She swept into the assembly ballroom that smelled heavily of tallow candles that alighted the wall sconces and wooden chandelier overhead. Baron Deverell was not difficult to find among the milling crowd, all dressed in their finest evening wear, with his broad shoulders clothed in the latest of London's fashions and his shock of golden curls that never could be trained into a pompadour. She rested her hand over her chest at the sight of him, this gentleman who was about to be *her* dear Baron Deverell. She wove through the crowded room, laughing as she was jostled by the merrymaking. She could hardly wait to claim her promised Scottish reel with him and sweep him away from that horridly lovely raven-haired Miss Fox, who seemed to be ever near these days. If Muriel weren't so certain of his partiality for caramel locks and chocolate eyes, she would have been tempted to give in to her jealousy. But soon she would never have need to fear any other woman attempting to abscond with his hand. She waited for his easy smile to spread at the sight of her and was rewarded with a flash of the darling set of dimples that proclaimed his echoed delight.

"Miss Beau, is it already time for our dance?" His rich, cultured timbre enveloped her as he extended his hand, nodded to Miss Fox, and led Muriel onto the parquet dance floor.

The music swelled and she whirled to and fro, admiring his performance of the reel and basking in the fact that he was about to promise himself to her forever. When their hands met once more under the center chandelier surrounded by the fresco of two lovers encircled by cherubs, lending to the romance of it all, Muriel tugged him to a halt while the other couples continued to swirl about them in perfect time. His eyes widened, and he at once attempted to recommence the reel with her. She shook her head, beaming up at him, confidence brimming. “Baron Deverell, I—”

“Miss Beau? Are you ill?” He moved to assist her from the parquet dance floor, his cheeks reddening as the whirling and thudding of feet about them lessened and the chamber orchestra came to a grating cessation. “Is it your ankle again?”

His heightened color gave her pause, and in that moment she realized he might not appreciate such a public display of affection. But she was committed now, as all were staring at them, some even subtly pointing, most likely thinking she had stumbled and missed a step and yet again upset a perfectly good reel. Before she dwelt more on what she was about to do, Muriel grasped his hand, holding it firmly, though he was making it difficult with his unrelenting tugging. She gripped it more securely and sank onto one knee, mindful to keep her hem over her ankles. “Baron Deverell, from the first moment I beheld you across the room of my parents’ parlor last Christmas, I knew you were the only one for me.”

Murmurs filled the ballroom, the fluttering fans ceasing their wafting as even the merchant gentlemen’s rumbustious merriment fell silent. She smiled to the crowd encircling them as he tugged again. He was causing this to be far less romantic. “Everyone in this room well knows of my decision not to marry until I have found love. Well, I am proud to say my heart has indeed been taken.” Muriel lifted the precious ring from her thumb. “It has been taken by you. Baron Deverell, will you do me the great honor of marrying me?”

He blinked at her for several moments, his silence roaring in her

ears, but she kept her gaze fixed on him and stayed her nerves, waiting for the rest of her life to begin.

Baron Deverell clutched her by the elbows and forcibly lifted her to her feet. "Miss Beau, whatever do you think you are doing?" he hissed into her ear. Smiling and nodding to the other guests, he fled with her toward the rear of the room and the doors that led to the stairs.

Her reply wilted in her throat, along with her hope. She pressed the heel of her hand over her heart, kneading at the knot of pain there. She attempted not to grimace as her gaze darted about the room, confirming the sneers were all too real as gossip spread, the matrons condemning her for her rash act, the maidens staring openly. Miss Fox cast her a piteous frown as, heaven help her, Elena Whelan elbowed through the crowd, the songbird of Kent already wearing a smug smile at Muriel's mortification. An involuntary whimper slipped past her lips, eliciting laughter from Elena, whose dowdy companion scowled and elbowed her into silence, offering Muriel a smile drenched in sympathy.

Had she come this far only to fail? *He must not have heard me in all the commotion.* She cringed. Even in her crazed state, she could see that reasoning was weak, as it would mean everyone in the room understood her meaning while Baron Deverell somehow did not. She dug her heels down, preventing him from fleeing, and again lifted the ring to him. "Baron Deverell—Osmund—will you marry me?"

He grunted, released her, and pushed the door open, motioning for her to go through. This time, she complied and preceded him on the stairs as the chatter began to rise. The ground floor, while less populated than the ballroom, unfortunately still held an audience of those wishing to escape the heat of many bodies in one hall. Vivienne had been right. Even if Baron Deverell was about to agree to marry her, the proposal had been an unmitigated disaster. "Say something, Osmund."

"Confound it." Baron Deverell raked his fingers through his hair, sighing. "*Miss Beau.* Why on earth did you think I'd say yes to such an unprecedented proposal?"

“You mean besides your courting me? I thought you’d think it was romantic.” Her account sounded pathetic to her own ears.

“Calling—not courting.” He corrected as a couple filed down the stairs. He guided her into the sitting room and to a vacant corner, where he paused beside an open window, whispering, “I was going to tell you tonight I have already decided to end our time together and *court* Miss Fox.”

“Miss Fox.” She gasped, her stomach tightening. “You were calling on Miss Fox too? Even though you have been court—calling on me since Christmas?” She corrected herself, the drastically less romantic word catching in her throat. The room seemed to close in, squeezing the air from her lungs, as it spun in her vision. She flapped her hand at her scooped neckline, attempting to cool her flushed cheeks, but her darling Calypso turban allowed for precious little draft. “And what about our weekly drives to and from Dover?”

“To be fair, I was calling on your stepfather in the beginning in an attempt to sell Mr. Fletcher my tea selections for his stores across England. And you were acting as your father’s emissary for personally inspecting my tea warehouse, as he was feeling under the weather on those occasions.”

Of course, it had started as her acting as emissary. But what of the trip to his late grandmother’s cottage in Dover to ask Muriel’s opinion on whether he should sell the newly inherited property? Wasn’t that a hint of his wish to marry her? To show her that he could put a roof over her head? Well, that *was* before she’d learned of his holdings in London and his family’s estate in the country, but it was difficult *not* to read into his asking her opinion. She lifted a single brow. “You spoke of courtship only last month.”

“Once and very briefly. I apologize you had to find out this way. I had to diversify the risk.” He pressed his lips into a thin line, crossing his arms over his broad chest and leaning down to her to add, “After all, you said it yourself. You have jilted two others. I did not wish to be the third and ruin my chances of happiness this season, which is why I began to see Miss Fox. And I must say, after two weeks at her side—”

“Two weeks?” Her voice squeaked in her attempt to keep her mien clear of tears. *A gentleman of honor would never do such a thing as court multiple women . . . unless there is some sort of rule I missed in that etiquette book I skimmed.* Even after being adopted into society upon her mother’s marriage to a well-born investor, Muriel still found herself lost in this world of stolen moments and veiled meanings, so different from their cozy bakery, where all she’d had to worry about was having enough sticky buns for the morning orders and bread to last the day. But, even so, surely a gentleman did not call upon two ladies at the same time? “How could you call on us both for two weeks?”

He shrugged, picking at the window frame and creating a mar in the paint where there hadn’t been any before. She resisted the urge to ask him to cease.

“How could I not, Miss Beau? You have been distant for a fortnight. I thought you were about to release me.”

“I was not being distant. I was planning tonight, trying to make it special for you.” Those blasted tears cracked her voice, betraying her confidence. Her fingers sought the comfort of her father’s ring, twisting it again and again, until it warmed her thumb.

Sympathy flashed through his hazel eyes as he ran his hand down her elbow to her wrist. He wrapped her gloved fingers between his strong hands, calloused from years aboard his merchant ship. “My dear Miss Beau, while I am flattered to be the first man in society to receive such a public proposal from a lady, I’m afraid I have already informed Miss Fox of my intentions, and it would be impossible to retrench now, even after your beguiling declaration. I will treasure tonight, even if I am unable to provide you the answer you desire.”

Impossible? No, he was only being kind as he always was in saying so. She swayed, pressing her hand to her cheek.

“Miss Beau?” He grasped her by the sleeves, crushing her sweet new gown of pink and white that had given her a bridal air.

Against her will, her face smashed against his crisp waistcoat, his cologne filling her senses, making her heart sore and limbs weak, which caused Baron Deverell’s solid arms to encompass her. If she

closed her eyes, she could still envision the dream she had longed for, where Baron Deverell accepted her hand, kissed her in front of all, and swept her away to his family estate to wed her. She felt her lips pucker and her chin lift. She was at once shifted in his arms.

“As tempting as it may be to kiss you, I have no right now, Miss Beau,” he whispered, slowly putting her at arm’s length even as he kept a firm hold on her waist to keep her upright.

“Oh no.” Vivienne’s voice broke through the haze, drawing Muriel back to the ghastly present to find her two dearest friends weaving through the curious onlookers to their side.

“Thank you for your assistance, Baron Deverell. I shall attend to her now.” Tess Hale’s arm wrapped about Muriel’s waist and pulled her into the safe circle of her closest friends.

“I—I must excuse myself to explain things to Miss Fox.” Baron Deverell bowed to them, his gaze meeting hers one last time. “I hope you realize I am truly sorry for the embarrassment I’ve caused you tonight, and should I hear anything less than the best of things being spoken about you—” He fiddled at the knot of his silk neckcloth and swallowed. “I apologize most profusely.”

“Thank you. Please attend to Miss Fox. I am well,” Muriel managed to squeeze out, along with a smile to demonstrate to him that she was not at all crushed, though she felt her chin tremble, which spoiled the attempt to appear strong. From his pained expression, she knew that he knew that she was not at all fine.

The room began to spin again. *Please, Lord, my humiliation knows no end tonight. Do not let me faint too.* Her friends each gripped an elbow and steered her through the crowd and straight out the door, the chilling air making it difficult to draw a full breath. They ducked against the assembly hall’s stone wall to keep from being spotted by the late-night pedestrians about the lane who had not secured a ticket for this evening’s ball, craning their necks to get a better look at what was occurring in the ballroom on the second level. Muriel chanced a stride away from the wall to glance to a floor-length window above them and

groaned when she found it was positively buzzing with partygoers. At one woman's frantic gesticulation with her fan, the entire room seemed to turn as one to the windows facing the torch-lit lane, peering at her, Vivienne, and Tess out of doors, effectively confirming all rumors that she, Muriel Beau, had been rejected.

Muriel pressed a hand to her mouth. Her accounts would not be long in making their appearance. Fully roused, she cried, "We've got to move!" She tugged her friends down the lane a couple of houses, halting only when they were safely out of sight of the ballroom.

"W—we need to fetch our cloaks." Vivienne shivered as mist dusted their turbans and shoulders. "My stepbrother would not approve of us being out of doors without him—"

"Her reputation is already damaged, so what is one more departure from society this night? Besides, we both know she'd rather be soaked and frostbitten than go back." Tess's cold fingers dug into the gaps of Muriel's stays as she rubbed her other hand up and down Muriel's already-crushed sleeve. All three of them shivered in their thin gowns. Tess nodded to the row of carriages lining the street in front of the assembly hall. "Since Muriel and I arrived on foot, we need to hail the hackney coach."

Vivienne broke away and secured the only hackney in the village, waving the coachman forward. Numbly, Muriel settled into the worn coach with her friends on either side as they tucked her under the hack's musty navy blanket. She turned her nose into her sleeve, fighting a gag from the blanket and was instead greeted with Baron Deverell's enchanting cologne. Her eyes stung.

Such a harsh awakening from the spell he had cast over her. Had he ever cared for her? Or was he like all the others, merely attracted to the prospect of her stepfather's business, connections, and substantial dowry to bestow on his only daughter? *But Miss Fox's dowry is several thousand less than mine.* In her heart, she knew the true reason why Miss Fox was preferable over her. Everyone did. She rubbed her temples and groaned. "Why did you let me propose marriage to him

in front of everyone?” She rested her head on Vivienne’s shoulder and focused on her familiar scent of lavender instead of the baron’s cologne to keep the tears in check.

Tess rubbed her hands, leaning into Muriel for warmth, her red curls trembling from her suppressed shivers. “From what Vivienne says, you were determined, and we all know how you are when you set your mind on something.”

“I couldn’t have stopped her even if I were wielding a mace and a box of pastries from Gunter’s.” Vivienne crossed her arms and lifted a brow to Muriel as if waiting for an apology.

She ignored their retorts, knowing they were right. This situation had been entirely her idea. She was the one who had ignored sage counsel and run straight into a scandal that would live beyond her years. Ton mothers across the country would point to her as an example of what not to do, trotting out Muriel’s shame every time their high-born daughters dared to bend polite society’s rigid rules, warning all debutantes of the consequences of departing from the safe arms of etiquette, no matter how romantic it might seem at the time. “Where are we going, anyway?” she murmured, partly to distract them.

“Fletcher Manor. And along the way we will figure out what to do before your parents hear of the news,” Vivienne replied, relaxing her posture once more and batting the trio of overlarge egret feathers adorning her headpiece out of her eyes.

“Do?” Muriel snorted, knotting the worn fringe of the blanket. “There is nothing to do now. There is nothing left for me here.”

“That is a touch dramatic.” Tess looked like she was about to roll her eyes before she recalled the gravity of the situation and instead ran her finger under her lower lashes to disguise her misstep.

Muriel buried her face in her hands. “I am never going to be able to show my face in polite society again.”

“Well, that much is true.” Tess tugged the blanket to cover her legs. “By morning, everyone will have read about it in the papers across the county.”

Vivienne leaned across Muriel and batted Tess's knee. "Not helpful, Tess."

Muriel fought to straighten her shoulders. She was stronger and more resilient than most wallflowers from her years as a baker's daughter keeping early and long hours, but this humiliation scorched her far worse than any mishaps with the oven. "I must keep running is all. How far do you think the coachman is willing to take me?"

"In this ancient hackney? We'll be fortunate to make it to your stepfather's estate before the wheels fall off. Besides, your family and whole life are here." Tess tapped her bottom lip with her forefinger. "We simply must find something so wonderful for you to accomplish that it covers tonight's scandal once and for all, allowing you to reclaim your place in the elite set."

Muriel kneaded her fist over the knot in her stomach. "The only way that will happen is if I make an advantageous match, which I never will now, as I have isolated myself from every eligible gentleman in Chilham through my rash behavior."

Vivienne gasped, clapping her hands. "That's it!"

"What's it? Do you have a gentleman hidden in some country estate we don't know about and who would not have heard about tonight's events?" Tess teased.

"Of course not. I overheard Mrs. Gordon tonight, talking about her plans for her daughter."

"Her three-year-old?" Muriel lifted her brows. "I do not see how that could possibly help me, unless you think I should become a governess."

Vivienne waved her off. "She was speaking of the future, of course. Mrs. Gordon said that she wants more for her daughter—"

"She is from one of the wealthiest families in the county," Tess interjected. "What could her little darling possibly obtain that she doesn't already possess?"

Vivienne waggled her brows. "What is the one thing the Gordons cannot achieve in Chilham society?"

Muriel's eyes widened, hope flooding her being. "A title," she breathed. "Mrs. Gordon wishes for her daughter to eclipse the gentry and become part of the aristocracy."

"That's brilliant, Vivienne." Tess clapped. "And with her vast dowry, Muriel should have her pick of suitors . . . as long as her past stays in Chilham. But, if she makes haste, she may have a proposal from a destitute London lord before the gossips do their worst."

Vivienne dipped her head in a bow, her wiry golden curls bobbing. "And there you have it. The perfect means of getting you out of this little predicament—marry an English nobleman and all will be forgotten."

With this plan on her heart, she had the hackney drop her at her family's manor and, without speaking to anyone, rushed upstairs to her chambers on the second floor and rang for her fleet of trunks to be lined along her bedroom wall. Yanking off a glove, she paused to slide off her father's wedding band before removing the other. She swallowed back the pain of rejection. While it was not customary for men to wear wedding bands, her first memories of her father had been his large, calloused hand wrapping around hers, the gold ring on his little finger flashing in the morning light on their walks to the bakery.

She swiped away her tears and returned the ring to its place on a simple gold necklace that she always had about her neck. While Mr. Fletcher had welcomed Muriel into his home upon his marriage to Mother and even invited her to call him Father, she knew she was a burden to him. A cherished burden, perhaps, but still a burden. One day, she hoped to have that feeling of complete belonging again. After tonight, she doubted it would be possible in Chilham.

Setting her jaw, she began pulling her gowns from the closet and laying them on her bed. She had just removed a third gown to pack when her mother's lady's maid appeared to summon her to her mother's chambers.

"And Miss Muriel," Mrs. Lyon whispered, clasping her hands before her pristine black uniform as they made haste down the long burgundy rug of the second-floor hall, the floors of the ancient hall creaking

underfoot, "I must warn you that a note arrived a moment before she sent me to fetch you."

They know. Anger flared toward the yet-to-be-named busybody who deemed it necessary to bear tales to her mother and stepfather. "Thank you for the forewarning, Mrs. Lyon." Muriel placed her hand on the doorknob, drew a bracing breath, and stepped into her mother's cozy private parlor with the fireplace flickering along with the candelabras and gold sconces.

"Oh Muriel," her mother whispered from the chaise lounge in the bow window, burying her face into her infant's dark hair, inhaling his sweet scent as if to calm herself. "Whatever were you thinking?"

Her stepfather shook his head, his hand resting on Mother's shoulders. His height and portly stomach seemed out of place against the delicate pink walls of her mother's bedroom and parlor. "The Widow Whelan has penned us the most dreadful account, but I am certain she did not present the most accurate view. Would you care to explain what happened, dear?"

Perhaps she should hold little Declan and take a sniff of his fluffy hair herself to calm her racing heart. But, with the full story yet to be disclosed, Mother would need him. She straightened her shoulders and launched into her horrid tale while her stepfather paced the length of the parlor to the bedroom threshold and back, his hands folded behind him. Muriel at last collapsed onto the foot of the chaise lounge beside her mother and drew the baby into her arms, snuggling him close. The steady rise and fall of his tummy soothed her, his sweet, perfectly round cheeks making it impossible not to press a gentle kiss on them.

Muriel's stepfather paused at the coffee tray before the fireplace, pouring himself a cup before answering. "A title is a lofty goal . . . though not a wholly unattainable one. I believe you may be correct that the only means of repair is to outstride society's expectations for your status. As you know, my old schoolmate Sir Alexander Ingram and his wife have a residence in London—though I believe in Sir Alexander's most recent letter, he mentioned his wife's traveling to see

a sick distant relative. If she has returned, I am certain they would be delighted to act as your chaperone, as they have no daughters of their own to usher into society.”

Relieved, Muriel nodded. As usual, her stepfather had understood her desires perfectly and sought to meet her needs as he would his own children’s. “Excellent. I was hoping you could contact them. You’ve spoken so fondly of the captain and his wife over the years that I knew they would be my best option if I were to attempt this rather dramatic move.”

Mother’s lips trembled. “But, if you marry a lord, you will leave us—not just this house, but this county.”

Father grasped Mother’s hand in his. “Which is the worst of it. We would be loath to part from you, Muriel, especially your little brothers. But, if we agree to this plan and it ends with a marriage, you must promise to visit your mother and our family every Christmas and we to visit you in the summers.” He swallowed, emotion clouding his words. “The pain of your absence would be too much to bear otherwise, my sweet daughter, and because of that, I plead with you to choose wisely. Do not allow a title to mar your judgment in the man’s character, which should be far superior to his title if a marriage is to work.”

She would miss her parents and her three sweet brothers dearly, but what other choice did she have? She looked to little Declan, with his darling full lips parted in sleep, his warm breath against her cheek filling her heart with longing. If she were to have any hope for children of her own one day, she needed to leave her small village to meet her husband. “If I can find a gentleman half as kind as you, Father, I will be rich indeed. And you all know I would come home often even without a promise to do so.”

Mother dabbed at her eyes with her lace cuff. “Then we will do our best to support you in your undertaking and have a new wardrobe made up to greet you at the Ingrams’ residence. Our girl shall only be seen in the best.”

Muriel grinned with more daring than she possessed. “Let the hunt for an English lord commence.”

Chapter Two

London

MURIEL HAD TWO MONTHS TO find an English lord before Parliament recessed along with the season, and after her first morning's extensive calling with Lady Ingram, she had already committed more faux pas than she could count. Apparently, for every rule she didn't know in Kent society, there were two more to take its place in London.

It had taken an agonizing two weeks to arrange her travel from Chilham to London what with securing an invitation from the Ingrams and having a fleet of new dresses ordered and altered. During that time, the village had treated her as a pariah. The censure against her had grown so palpable she even deemed it necessary to neglect Sunday service, after which the vicar called upon her to offer her his advice and pass her a sealed letter. He said it contained a psalm he thought she would find useful. But, in truth, she had been so mortified by his calling to offer advice she scarcely recalled what he had said and had tucked the note away in her reticule to avoid being reminded of the encounter and her lack of decorum.

But after the last residence where Muriel had accidentally dropped an iced sponge on the settee, her shortcomings were growing more and more evident despite Lady Ingram's assurance that Muriel's vast dowry would go a long way in smoothing out any inadequacies. Even so, as there was no time to prepare before the marquess's dinner party tonight, where the Prince Regent would be in attendance, she was

beginning to wonder if she had sprung out of the baking tin and into the oven with her scheme for redemption.

Muriel ran the soles of her shoes over the decorative foot scraper in the recess by the Ingrams' front door in Grosvenor Square and followed the elegant Lady Ingram into their opulent yet cozy London house. Fighting against the urge to slouch against the closed door at her overwhelming failure, Muriel surrendered her bonnet to the Ingrams' butler, Clayton, mortified after the events of the morning and exhausted at the prospect of the chase before her.

"I know this morning was rather difficult for you, my dear." Lady Ingram patted Muriel on the arm, her gray eyes sympathetic as she paused in the foyer. She whispered something to the butler before turning to Muriel. "Why don't you find your way to the kitchen and bake us something delightful? Clayton is having the staff vacate it now. Your father mentioned it always calms you, and I've already forewarned the staff to accommodate you. We can discuss circulating amongst the nobility more in depth after tonight. I want to see you in action before I attempt to help mold you."

Hadn't her mishaps today been evidence enough that Muriel desperately needed instruction? But she smiled her thanks to her hostess and started for the kitchen. She crossed through the grand dining room to the impressive courtyard gardens, lingering on the gravel path through the luscious flower garden that led to the detached kitchen. She plucked a blossom and inhaled, closing her eyes against all distractions. *Lord, you know the desires of my heart. I've waited so long for a family of my own—for a gentleman who saw beyond my lack of rank. How much longer do I need to wait?* Her stomach rumbled. She needed to bake. Perhaps she would hear the Lord amidst flour, sugar, and yeast.

She tucked the flower into her coiffure and tentatively opened the door only to find that the cook and staff had already quit the area, leaving their preparations for the next meal on the corner of the far counter and the cast iron open range hot for her use. Humming, she tied on the clean apron she found laid out for her on the long pine table that was scrubbed pale from years of use, the scarring in the wood sanded down

but still visible. Measuring, sifting, mixing, and rolling, she sorted through her mistakes and brought them to the Lord, hoping for a solution to save her reputation in London before she had truly even begun her search for her titled lord at tonight's grand ball.

By the time her apple pie was ready to come out of the oven and her second batch of vanilla scones was ready to go in, she had a comforting sheen of sweat on her brow and her prayers had turned into singing—or rather bellowing—her favorite hymns. Wiping her hands on her apron, she worked out a recipe that she thought would be a match for the sponge she had tasted and promptly dropped during her calls this morning. She rose on her tiptoes to reach the tin marked Flour on the third shelf in the dry larder, which was acceptable if one was of an average height, but Muriel, being only an inch over five feet, could only scrape the bottom of the ten-pound tin with her fingertips. She snatched her wooden rolling pin from the table and used the tip to scoot the tin to the edge of the shelf, intending to catch it as it fell.

A man's large, calloused hand shot above her head and seized the tin. "Allow me to assist you."

Her song strangled itself in a gasp. Whirling, she rammed into his arm, causing the tin to slip from his grasp and the heavy pin from her hand. Both knocked him on the head, loosening the lid and showering them with flour as he fell to his knees with a grunt and then collapsed face flat onto the brick pavers.

"Lord, have mercy." Muriel clutched her hand to her throat and sank to her knees beside the crumpled giant. Grabbing his muscular right shoulder with all her strength, she flipped the man onto his back and saw at once that his left arm was in a sling. His large, Grecian nose trickled blood from his fall to the bricks. Other than that and the lump already forming just below his thick chocolate hairline, he was in marvelous physical condition. With his impeccable jawline and the sun-kissed skin that she glimpsed beneath the flour, she knew he had enjoyed fine health before waltzing into her kitchen. She leapt to her feet and ran for the pitcher of water on the counter. Pitcher wrapped in her arm, she dipped her fingers inside and flicked water onto his

flour-covered face as if he were a pie crust, continuing the practice until a fine paste had formed on his forehead and a moan escaped his full lips.

“Oh, thank God. I haven’t killed him,” she whispered, sinking onto her heels and wiping her forehead, feeling the grit of flour roll across her skin. She leaned over him, her dark hair spilling free from her coiffure over her shoulder, flowing down to his chest. “Sir? Are you hurt badly? Sir? Can you hear me?”

As he was once again lying too still for comfort, she dared to rest her hand gently on his chest, feeling beneath his waistcoat hardened muscles that spoke of years of hard labor. She patted the magnificent man’s cheek with her left hand, hoping to wake him. “Sir?”

His strong hand grazed over his brass waistcoat buttons until it rested atop hers, tightening as he coughed from the bits of flour he’d no doubt inhaled. His thick, paste-covered lashes flickered and, focusing on her, his dark eyes widened at the sight of her. He lurched upward, wincing.

She pressed her hand to his chest, forcing him to stay seated. “Sir? Are you hurt?” She repeated.

“Nothing that time won’t heal.” He ran his finger over the lump with a grunt, his words slurring, “I apologize for alarming you, miss.” He motioned to a crate sitting at the open back door. “I was delivering a package for his lordship.”

She sank back on her heels. *With an injured arm? He must need the money, and here I’ve potentially injured him further!* “My apologies, sir. I didn’t hear you knock or enter the kitchen . . . or dry larder.” Her gaze ran over his coat. Though covered in flour, it was well tailored for a deliveryman who was desperate enough to work through an injury. *Perhaps he has fallen on hard times and has mouths to feed at home?*

“With your singing, I imagine not.” His molasses eyes sparkled at her.

Her cheeks warmed at being caught. Hopefully he would think it from the heat of the oven. “So are you going to tell me your name? Or did I knock that directly from your head?”

“Erik.” He extended his hand to her, his delicious, deep voice commanding the room, even if it was only her and the baked goods.

He was most certainly a deliveryman. In her brief time in London, she had learned the nobility always expected one to know their titles and would only introduce themselves with the fullest extent of their names. But she would not be snobbish with a man who would have been a match for her only a decade ago by reciting her full name. She accepted his hand, shaking it as she had in the old days and enjoying the freedom of informality. “Pleasure to meet you, Erik. I’m Muriel.”

“Ariel? What a lovely name.”

“Thank you.” She swallowed back the need to correct him. What did it matter? He would only ever see her again on the off chance she was in a baking storm and he was delivering something to the kitchen.

He hoisted himself up and extended his hand to help her stand even as he swayed on his feet.

She scrambled to her feet and wrapped her arms around him at once, steadying him as she craned her neck to assess his coloring. His lips quirked into a surprised half smile at her actions, as if he was not accustomed to females throwing their arms about his waist. Her cheeks heated once again at her forwardness. Even if he was a deliveryman and unavailable, he was still a man and she a supposed lady, and here she was with her arms about him. She pushed him toward a stool alongside the counter where she had been working. “Perhaps you should have a seat? Are you hungry?” Without waiting for an answer, she snatched a vanilla scone with bits of melted chocolate inside and handed it to him.

He nodded his thanks and took a bite, his eyes widening. “This is divine, Miss Ariel. I have not tasted such a delightful treat in months.”

“My secret ingredient is soured cream.” She couldn’t keep herself from querying, “Do you have a gaggle of children? You must take some with you to your family. It’s the least I can do. I have a dozen I can spare.” She piled the warm scones into a cloth along with a few pastries, tying the corners into a knot and pushing away the old ache of wishing she were baking for her own little ones and husband.

“That is entirely unnecessary, but I can’t seem to find a way to say

no.” Erik grinned and accepted the makeshift sack. “And as I have no family or children, I know I will be feasting on your baking for my dinner.”

Oddly pleased with this striking man’s lack of a wife and that he enjoyed her baking, she tested the tin that held the apple pie and, satisfied it would not burn him, covered it with a cloth and slid it over to him, making a mental note to replace the items from her pin money. “Please, take the pie as well.”

He looked as if he were about to protest, but then he inhaled the delightful aroma of cinnamon and grinned. “I thank you, Miss Ariel, for your kindness.”

She smiled up at him—he was still taller than her even while seated—and nodded toward the small crate, partly to get her mind away from his arresting eyes that made her wish to bake a chocolate confection in the same hue. “So, what’s inside the crate? It must be important for you to risk your life by entering my kitchen unannounced.”

“Well, usually a domestic delivery does not entail such risks.” He winked at her, finishing off his scone. “I’m delivering exotic tea. His lordship has quite the taste for it.”

“Ah, do you work for a tea merchant?” she interjected as she rested her hip against the counter and crossed her arms, unable to keep herself from attempting to piece together this handsome man’s story.

“I’m a sailor, which led to this.” He gestured to his arm. “So I am anchored until my arm heals, which hopefully won’t take too long, as there is much for me to do at sea.”

“I’m so sorry for your injury. You must have been doing something exciting to receive it. I’ve only sailed the River Thames once when I came here with my parents years ago. I never tossed my accounts once, which the captain said is a trait needed at sea.”

His lips parted. “You spoke with the captain about tossing your accounts?”

She checked the clock atop the cook’s desk, peeked into the oven, and retrieved the scones, a burst of vanilla filling the air. “It came up because Vivienne, my dearest friend, was ill, and I wished to provide

a remedy. I asked the staff to prepare some ginger tea for her. While I waited for them to ready the brew, I snuck to the bowels of the vessel to explore and was found out by none other than the captain—”

He hid his chuckle behind his hand.

“Did I say something diverting? I’m always saying something odd when I get too comfortable around someone,” she muttered, raking her fingers down her cheeks and shaking her head. “I suppose I must simply remain uncomfortable for my time here in order not to shame myself.”

“Not at all . . . I’ve simply been aboard a ship for a long while and haven’t had such delightful conversation in quite some time.”

Her brow lifted at his turn of phrase, which seemed rather polished for the crewmen she had encountered. Perhaps it was his deep voice that made every word seem elegant. His gaze held hers in a most disconcerting manner, as if he found her captivating, and the spark in her belly echoed his interest. *No. No! You had your chance to find any man of any status you desired in the whole county of Kent, and you ruined it. A title or nothing, Muriel Beau.* She dropped her gaze and bent to retrieve the flour tin and save the remaining flour. “Be that as it may, I don’t think very many London girls are like me.”

He claimed the tin at once and set it on the counter for her. “No, I think not, but I must say again that these scones are the best I’ve ever had. Where did you train?”

Relieved at the change in topic, she measured away for her sponge and, without telling him of her mother’s marriage to a gentleman, spoke to him of her happiest days in her little bakery in the village of Chilham.



The Earl of Draycott held the pie to his chest with his injured hand as he closed the kitchen door behind him and took the side door that led out toward Brook Street, still smiling from the gentle baker’s behavior toward him. It had been nice to be seen for a few moments as a

fellow servant and not a captain, or an earl—even if it had resulted in a ruined suit and a lump on his forehead. The pretty country baker had made it worth the pain with her attention, the mound of scones, and the tantalizing pie.

Children darted around him from behind, thin and bedraggled, their eyes lingering on the pie in his hands. Though wrapped with a cloth, the sweet aroma wafting out called to all nearby. He sighed. If the pie were half as tasty as it smelled, he would have been in for a treat. He handed it, along with a coin, to the eldest in the group, a scrawny girl of mayhap seven years or so in a gown that was more tatters than fabric. The trio scampered off with whispers of thanks. He grinned at their enthusiasm and for the excuse it lent him to return to Ariel's kitchen all the sooner, under the guise of needing another baked good in compensation for his head wound and bloodied nose.

It had been quite nice to have a pretty girl smile at him without guile or farce. The thought of her bright eyes made him hesitate, though. It was not prudent to flirt with any woman with whom he could not possibly have a future, no matter how excellent a baker she was . . . not with the clause in his uncle's will about his state of matrimony and his need for an heiress to sustain the Draycott estate for future generations. Apparently his prize money from the war against Napoleon was insufficient. Further, he hoped to hire this unusual baker when he at last retired from chasing smugglers and French ships across the high seas, even if it required him to poach her from his old friend and captain, Sir Alexander. No, it would not do to think on the maid beyond her baked goods.

As no hackney would wish him in his coach with the flour coating him, he trotted down to a less populated street toward his London residence in Berkeley Square when a shadow caught his eye. He fought to maintain his easy gait. Ears attuned to the boots clicking a steady pace behind him, he cautiously reached into his coat, wincing against the pull on his shoulder wound. He gripped his gun and, in a single motion, whirled around, planting the barrel of his pistol into the chest of the man. "Why are you following me?"

The man lifted his hands, a knife gripped between his middle fingers. "I don't want no trouble."

"Then you shouldn't have come looking for it. Did Requin send you?"

His gaze clouded. "Don't know no Requin. You gave money to my litter."

"And you wished to thank me with a knife between my shoulder blades and pilfer the remainder of my funds?" Erik challenged, his jaw clenching.

The man's eyes flicked over Erik's shoulder. Keeping his gun trained on the man, Erik risked a glance to ensure it wasn't Requin's man creeping up on him. Two women on the front step of a row house skittered to a halt at the sight of his gun before dashing inside, which gave the pickpocket a chance to bolt. Erik didn't wish to risk firing at a man in the row of houses, where families might exit at any moment. If the man were in Requin's pocket, he would be dealt a far less generous hand for his failure. Likely, though, he was naught but a common thief.

Erik returned his pistol to its holster under his jacket and chastised himself for the close encounter. He paused at the edge of Berkeley Square's gardens, frowning as he gazed up at his building. Though he had not seen the place in the nearly three years since signing his last contract with the crown, he'd sent more than enough funds for his estate's care. Yet not a single curtain was drawn. Thoughts of the pickpocket faded as he trotted to the front door and tapped the wrought iron knocker. He hadn't let the staff know he'd returned, but that was the nature of being wounded. It left little time for warning. Even so, someone should have been at the door to welcome him or anyone who might approach the house. He pulled the bell, the strident ringing sounding through the carved front door.

When no answer came, he patted his pockets, found the skeleton key, and unlocked the door. His jaw slacked at the dust covering every surface, the cobwebs expertly woven between the chandelier's crystals, and the gilded looking glass covered in a gray cloth that might have been white at some point. As he strode farther into the foyer, he

noticed dust did not lift from the marble floors, as if they, at least, had been swept recently. He scowled.

“Mrs. Hodge?” He called up the stairs for the housekeeper, leaning over the gold leaf stair rail that left his palms covered in dust. In all his years staying with Uncle over his winter breaks from sailing, Erik had never seen this house in such disrepair, with cracks in the front windows, dingy drop cloths over every piece, and even the gilded sconces caked in dust.

“Mrs. Hodge?” He strode down the hall toward the basement kitchen, his footsteps echoing the pounding in his chest. Had his nemesis discovered his true identity and followed him home at last? He ran his hand over his freshly shaven jaw. It wasn’t the best of disguises, but at sea he had worn a full beard, only ever shaving when he returned home. The only ones who had ever seen him without a beard were the skeleton crew he trusted to see to the ship while others took in the delights of London. Surely, he would have been notified if Requin had attacked his residence and staff in revenge for Erik’s capturing a high-ranking smuggler in his ring? But what else could he think when his well-paid staff was nowhere to be found?

If there had been an attack, you and all of London would have been notified. He exhaled and took account of the ground floor. If his modest four-storied home was this deviant, how much worse off was his castle in Draybridge? He searched the length of the house for the housekeeper, or anyone at all. The place was all but abandoned. At a thumping at the rear servant’s entrance, Erik ducked into the shadows and watched as the doorknob turned and his retired butler, Trumbull, ambled inside, a basket over one arm and a cane clutched in the other. His clothes were clean, albeit in desperate need of replacing.

“Trumbull?” Erik strode out of the shadows.

“Erik Draycott?” His wrinkled lips parted and slowly spread into a smile, revealing his yellowed teeth. He swung open the back door. “This explains your two trunks on the back stoop, my lord. You are home at last. It’s been, what? Three years?”

Erik nodded and fetched the luggage himself, hefting one end of

his largest trunk first, the effort straining the stitches of his once-fine suitcoat as he dragged the trunk inside. "An injury forced me to return unexpectedly." Wincing, he readjusted his black cloth sling and nodded to their surroundings. "Where is everyone? And why on earth is this place in such disrepair?"

"I thought you knew, your lordship. Your steward closed up this house, save for me to keep it from being robbed."

Erik eyed the bent man. If Mr. Trumbull was all that stood between this place and danger, it was a wonder the house had not been emptied by burglars. "That is preposterous. I have been sending more than enough funds to see to its upkeep." *Either Guy Mayfield is being overly zealous in his attempt to save the estate, which I highly doubt, or the payments are being intercepted.* He clenched his fists. He trusted his steward unreservedly, and Requin's reach had proven to be further than he had thought possible in the past. He could not afford to underestimate him again. If Requin was behind the missing funds, more than just his London house was at risk.

"I do not know the reason, my lord. Mr. Mayfield said you wrote to him and asked him to redirect the funds for this house to some bank in London."

Requin knew. Erik's neck prickled. He didn't know how the smuggler had discovered his identity . . . and why had Requin stopped his attack with the funds of the London residence? Which bank was funneling money into his enemy's pocket? He swallowed, attempting to keep his expression and voice clear of emotions. "I shall remedy that at once. The place looks dreadful."

Trumbull set his basket atop the surprisingly clean kitchen table. "It's all I can do to climb the levels each night to draw the curtains and light and unlight the lamps to keep people from thinking the townhouse is completely vacant and unguarded. My knees wouldn't allow the climb today. Besides that, I try to thoroughly clean a room a week."

At a room a week, no wonder the house looked as it did. "Which one is clean now?"

"I set up my room in the butler's pantry, so it is clean as well as the

kitchen.” His cheeks reddened. “Now I am wishing I didn’t just clean my rooms this week. However, the rotation—”

“Please. Do not fret on my account.” Erik unbuttoned his coat with his good arm, grimacing as he slipped the ruined piece from his shoulders and off his injured arm, at once returning his left arm into the sling, the strain leaving a sheen of sweat on his brow as his shoulder and wrist throbbed. His hand slipped to the pain medication in his pocket.

His London doctor, who had been Erik’s first call upon disembarking this morning, had insisted on supplying him with it the moment Erik admitted to the pain keeping him from sleeping for the past two weeks. After ensuring that the rapier wound to his shoulder was clean and on the mend, the doctor insisted on immobilizing Erik’s wrist and shoulder with a wrap and sling for the remainder of the week. At Erik’s protest, the doctor reminded him that he was fortunate to have only a sprained wrist and a clean shoulder wound. He’d narrowly missed damage to his ligaments that would have rendered his arm fairly useless. Not to mention that the cut could have easily festered. Erik had to swallow back his retort on having an efficient ship’s doctor, lest he elongate the conversation.

For the pain, the doctor assured Erik that opium was quite effective. Still, Erik withdrew it from his pocket and bit the cork, tugging it free from the neck as he thrust the bottle out of the back window, turning it upside down. The contents splattered on the cobblestones as they drained away. He’d rather never sleep than rely on that devil’s brew. He’d seen firsthand what it could do when his uncle was lost in grief over his wife’s death. Trumbull made no comment as Erik tossed the empty bottle into the rubbish bin.

“I will be bunking with you until I can acquire new staff and get to the bottom of the redirection of the funds. Until then, I need to ready myself for a ball tonight in Kensington Gore. The Prince Regent will be there, and I need to make his acquaintance at last, considering my newly inherited title.” He regarded his trunks and ran his hand over his left shoulder, grunting. “I am loath to ask it of you, but would you mind acting as my valet?”

“Of course, my lord.” The butler beamed. “To feel useful again is a wonderful thing.”

Erik adjusted the strap anchoring him to the land when his soul longed to be at sea making a difference in the war against Napoleon. “Yes, I understand how you feel.” He cleared his throat and shook off his self-pity. If he must be grounded, he would at least lobby for one more contract from the Prince Regent’s advisor, giving him another year to capture the greatest smuggler of his time. And with Sir Alexander acting as advisor, he would be setting sail with his new letter of marque within a fortnight.