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MR. DAY


AMERICAN ROYALTY
BOOK TWO

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, 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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hitchcock, Grace, author.

Title: Her darling Mr. Day / Grace Hitchcock.

Other titles: Her darling Mister Day

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker
Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: American royalty ; book 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2021031569 | ISBN 9780764237980 (trade paperback) | ISBN
9780764239830 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493436026 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Romantic suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.I834 H47 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021031569>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by Create Design Publish LLC, Minneapolis, Minnesota / Jon Godfredson

Author is represented by The Steve Laube Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Cora Belle,
My Little Flower*

He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up
their wounds.
He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them
all by their names.

Psalm 147:3–4

One

PORT OF NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
JUNE 1883

It had taken some of her best work to convince her parents and four sisters to summer in New Orleans instead of in their mansion in Newport, but with Teddy Day *finally* a bachelor once more, Flora Wingfield wasn't leaving anything to chance. She leaned against the polished rail of the steamboat, gripping her chapeau as she peered down at the muddy Mississippi River, attempting to catch a glimpse of life below the surface, but she doubted that if she stuck her hand in the water, she would even see her own fingers. Instead, all that greeted her was the blurry reflection of her cream hat peeking over the side of the boat.

At the *Belle Memphis's* jarring whistle, she straightened and pulled at her high collar, the thick air leeching upon her skin. The hum of the levee workers greeted her as the boat's paddle wheel slowly churned into port. As the landing stage swung into position, Flora was jostled against the crowd pressing with the rest of the passengers to disembark at long

last. She clutched her beaded reticule to her chest, having been thoroughly warned against pickpockets by Father after losing her pin money on the journey here.

She at last ambled down the landing stage and broke free from the group. She pushed back her golden curls from her face and, with her hands on her slim hips, whirled around and around, drinking in the city from the waterfront. Craning to see over the hundreds upon hundreds of bales of cotton and countless wooden barrels being stacked and readied for shipment, she made out the distant spire of a church above all else in the clear sky. While the New Orleans port was not quite as deafening as New York's, the cadence was different with drawn-out words, dipping and swaying in an unfamiliar, lovely pattern. "Beautiful," she whispered. And what was even more beautiful was the thought that Teddy Day was in the same city as she for the first time since—well, she wouldn't think about *that* part.

She turned back to the steamboat and strained her neck, searching for her family and spotting Tacy's orange gown almost at once. It was a rather hideous gown, yet her sister was not one to hide herself in a crowd, and as a close friend of the Vanderbilts had commented that Mrs. Vanderbilt hinted it was to be the hue of the season, Tacy had immediately ordered a fleet of orange gowns from Worth.

Flora lifted her handkerchief and waved it above her head, but instead of garnering her family's attention, she was met with that horridly familiar grin beneath the thin greasy mustache of Mr. Grayson, who lifted his cane in greeting. She at once shifted her gaze and to her relief found Father stepping onto the dock, extending his hand to Mother and leaving it there for Ermengarde, Olive, Tacy, Nora, and finally cousin

Cornelia, who kept her hand splayed against her back, supporting her ever-growing girth. The family had been a bit uneasy when Cornelia had requested to summer with them while her husband was in Europe so she wouldn't be alone for the remainder of her pregnancy. But in the end, Father shrugged and acquiesced, for what was one more female in their troupe?

Even from yards away, Flora could hear the high-pitched complaints already flowing from her younger sisters. She gritted her teeth and moved to join them. Before any petulant comments could be directed her way, she lifted her hands in hopes of warding off an attack. "Now, I know it may not be as cool of weather as I initially promised, but I am certain once we reach Auntie's mansion on St. Charles Avenue, it will be *much* . . ." But of course her words were lost in the cacophony erupting from the group. Flora pinched the bridge of her nose and inhaled. An hour longer and she would have the privacy of walls to separate herself from her three youngest sisters with whom the only things she had in common were their mother's clear blue eyes and Father's golden hair. *This will all be worth it when Teddy and I are walking down the aisle at summer's end, she reassured herself, chanting, A bride by fall. A bride by fall.*

Olive gave her a sympathetic smile. "Here, use this." She whipped out her fan, handing it to Tacy in a vain effort of ceasing the flow of complaints regarding the palpable heat.

The group came to a halt as Mother bade farewell to the two families they had become acquainted with during the journey, promising to stay in touch, even though Flora knew well and good that Mother had no such intention.

They were merely friends of convenience, and they were no longer convenient.

“Mr. Wingfield?” A middle-aged man with wisps of gray-ing hair in a canary-colored livery approached them, hat in hand. “I’m Peterson, a footman to Mrs. Dubois, and I’ve come to fetch you to the lady’s residence.”

“A bit old to be a footman.” Father eyed him and gestured to the mountain of Louis Vuitton flat-top trunks that were still being unloaded from the steamboat. “See to collecting our things at once. I wish to be seated for dinner as soon as possible.”

With a grunt surely aimed at the shameful amount of luggage, the servant showed Father and Flora to a wagonette while a second, younger fellow in the same yellow livery began loading the bags and trunks into another wagon.

Mother emerged through the crowded docks with Flora’s sisters and cousin trailing behind in a burst of vibrant brocades, cotton sateens and bustles, her brilliant smile fading on sight of their transportation. “A *wagonette*?” Mother narrowed her gaze at the driver, who quickly busied himself assisting the servants loading the tower of trunks. Having no one upon whom to bestow her ire, she whirled to Father, whispering, “This is beyond humiliating. Your aunt should have sent us two open carriages, Florian. But no, instead we are to be treated like a group of country servants, seated atop benches for all the world to see. What a fashion to enter into New Orleans society.”

Father ran his hand over the back of his neck, concern flickering through his features. “Yes, we do seem rather exposed. Anyone could recognize us . . .”

Flora twisted her hands. This entire situation was unravel-

ing far sooner than she had anticipated. “I’m certain Auntie Violet did not mean any disrespect, Mother. Surely, when she read how many were in our party from my letters, she thought it would be easier on the servants to drive us—”

“We are *knickerbockers*, Flora. That should count for something.” Mother huffed and climbed aboard, settling her voluminous brocade skirts about her while the rest of the exhausted company piled inside, Father taking his seat beside Mother, Ermengarde and Nora behind them with a birdcage between her and Cornelia, leaving Flora, Olive, and Tacy to scrunch together on the last bench seat.

Despite their outlandish appearance, Flora sat straight and gripped the open windowsill of the wagonette and observed the flurry of activity in the French Quarter. Between the shouting vendors, tourists, and street musicians performing on nearly every corner, the streams of people weaving through, she was beginning to worry that the tranquil summer she had promised Father was not actually going to happen when they pulled onto an avenue dripping in low-lying branches of majestic oaks, and the din faded into the background.

“How much farther?” Tacy shouted to the driver.

Flora flinched. *How does someone so slight have that much nasally power in her voice?* She resisted rubbing her ear, as she knew Tacy would take offense in an instant and another fight would ensue.

“Little over a mile, Miss Wingfield,” the driver called over his shoulder, the footman nodding his agreement beside him on the front seat.

“Thank goodness for that.” Mother’s fan slowed.

And with Tacy slumping back in her seat, Flora sighed at

the few moments of blessed silence as they passed mansion after graceful mansion on St. Charles Avenue that made their brownstone home in Gramercy Park seem plain in comparison to the opulent Corinthian-columned verandas. Flora reached for her reticule, itching to use her white pearl opera glasses in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the interiors in passing. She rubbed the outline of the lenses inside her bag and decided that instead of earning a reprimand from her mother for being so obviously nosy, she would keep alert for the numbers over the doors of each mansion to discover which belonged to Teddy and if she could make him out in the parlor window. If only she could actually *use* her opera glasses, she probably could catch a glimpse of him, satiating her aching soul for only a moment. She shook her head at the ridiculous wish. Teddy would be at the office at this hour or perhaps just finishing a meeting at a client's residence. It was for the best she didn't see him, for if she did, she wouldn't be able to sleep tonight with thoughts of their contrived encounter that she had been planning for weeks.

"Why, isn't that Theodore Day on horseback? What are the odds we run into him on our *first* day in New Orleans?" Tacy exclaimed loud enough to raise the shades of St. Charles Avenue.

Flora craned around Tacy. She would recognize Teddy's broad shoulders and striking form anywhere. "Yes," she breathed, longing to call to him after the two months apart. Had he missed her as much as she had him? Or was he simply glad to be away from New York after being jilted by her dearest friend?

"Mr. Day!" Tacy crooned, waving her lace-trimmed hand-

kerchief to the figure ahead of them at the corner they were very rapidly approaching.

“Shh.” Flora clapped her hand over her sister’s mouth, ducking down, praying that he would not see her, but it would take a miracle for Teddy not to hear her sister’s shrill call. “I did not journey *hundreds* of miles to have him see me for the first time all covered in the grime of travel.” She bit her lip as she realized she had said the wrong thing, as all in the wagonette turned in their seats to stare at her.

Father set aside his paper, narrowing his gaze, a smirk appearing at the corner of his mouth. “You mean to tell us that all those long speeches you gave us over a month and a half of dinners on the magnificent education the girls would receive being immersed in the grand architecture and rich interiors of the city with its French and Spanish influences, its culture, food, and music were all a ruse?”

“You knew?” Flora pressed the back of her hand to her flaming cheek. She had *purposefully* not mentioned the Day family in all her hours of convincing, except briefly during her presentation of the advantages of the variation of high society in New Orleans.

“Of course.” Mother dabbed her handkerchief over her forehead. “Do you think I would have dragged my girls anywhere besides Rhode Island for the summer season if there were not ample bachelors to choose from to make you all suitable husbands? The Day family is one of the only families in New Orleans with knickerbocker roots. And we heartily approve of the Day brothers, especially with the wonderful press Theodore has been receiving after Willow Dupré’s competition to find a husband ended in April. Securing the affections of a man who was jilted by

the famed sugar queen is worth a summer in this oppressive humidity.”

Flora dropped her gaze. *Of course, that was the only presentation Mother found moving.* When it came to young men paying court to one of the Wingfields’ five daughters, especially the eldest, Mother would move heaven and earth to make a favorable match. Not that Flora was against the idea of marriage, as it was the motivation behind this whole scheme, but she was only open to the idea of marriage to one man in all the world. And that man just happened to live on the opposite side of the country, who was now literally within reach.

“This trip is about acquiring husbands for you all,” Mother continued. “Well, minus Nora . . . though I suppose sixteen is old enough to secure a promise of a marriage to occur in a few years.”

“Flora? Is that you?” Teddy called from atop his ebony stallion as their wagonette slowed. He grinned and swept off his broad-brimmed hat, revealing a ring of matted blond curls he had cropped much shorter than he usually kept them, and he now sported a closely shaven, blond beard that complemented his russet eyes.

Flora straightened, quite aware of her chapeau’s undignified, squished state between two sisters and the sheen of perspiration dotting her forehead and the seven pairs of relatives’ eyes fixed upon them. “Why, Teddy Day, what a wonderful surprise!”

Tacy snorted, and Flora gave her a sharp jab in the corset stays, keeping her smile firmly in place.

“It is delightful to see you all! Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Wingfield. Ladies. What brings you to the illustrious Crescent City?” Teddy tipped his hat in greeting to the rest

in her party and adjusted the leather strap across his chest, attached to a narrow leather tube upon his back, which no doubt housed his latest steamboat designs.

A chorus answered him, and Flora gritted her teeth. This was not how their first meeting was supposed to transpire. She had planned to happen upon him in her darling new, striped cream walking suit, perfumed in what she believed was his favorite scent of gardenias, completely unaware of his beauty, and *alone*—not with her entire family looking on as she stumbled through her explanation of their unexpected appearance in her wrinkled rose-colored suit. Thank goodness she had worn her new hat.

He laughed, clearly enjoying the chaos. “Do you have accommodations?”

“We are summering with Great-Auntie Violet,” Flora interjected before anyone else could speak over her.

His brows rose as he tugged his ebony planter hat back into place, his horse prancing to the side as a carriage rolled past. “Violet *Dubois*? How did I not know she was your relation? Why, her mansion is but a ten-minute walk from my residence.” He gestured to a two-story, pale-blue mansion on his right with scrolling Ionic columns and a modest veranda adorned with potted ferns on either side of its ornate front door. “Would you care to take a stroll with me, Flora?” He looked to her mother. “If it is agreeable with you, Mrs. Wingfield.”

Her heart leapt, and Olive squeezed her hand, knowing the full extent of Flora’s desire to be with Teddy. Flora regarded her mother, desperately attempting to conceal her excitement, for it would not do for him to recognize the depth of her affection so soon.

“She would be *honored*, sir.” Mother flapped her hands at her youngest daughters to move them to the side and make room for Flora to pass. “Tacy and Olive, follow along behind them. It will do you all a world of good to walk after being cooped up since the train ride to Illinois and then the everlasting steamboat route to the port.”

“Wonderful!” Teddy dismounted, then drew the reins over the horse’s head and led him to the gate, handing his mount off to the waiting stableboy.

With a romance on the line, Tacy for once did not complain but instead followed Olive out of the wagonette. And as Flora passed Cornelia, her cousin pressed her own lovely Parisian lace parasol into Flora’s hands. “Breathe. All will be well.”

Flora smiled, hopped from the wagonette, and placed her gloved hand in Teddy’s, the touch sending a pulse through her body. Mother sent her an indiscreet wink and motioned the wagonette onward, Father returning to today’s copy of the *Picayune* without a second glance to Teddy.

Her sisters slid past them, pointing at things that caught their eye, giggling and completely aware of their oldest sister’s tumultuous heart. While Tacy’s favorite pastime was husband hunting, Flora had never before attempted to capture a young man in the net of matrimony, but Teddy was not just any man. At least she was wearing a gown that would bring out her blue eyes and that she knew for a fact was his favorite color on a lady. As she opened the parasol, momentarily blocking herself from Teddy’s view, she quickly turned her head and sniffed her puffed sleeves and winced. She should have dabbed on more perfume this morning. If only Father hadn’t insisted on scrimping and providing a

single maid for his daughters for the entirety of the summer, she would have fresh clothes daily.

Flora rested the parasol on her shoulder and smiled. “Teddy, it really is marvelous seeing you. I haven’t heard from you since—” She clamped her mouth shut and kept her focus on the front-yard landscapes. *Since the night of the ball when I stole Cullen into Willow’s suite to convince her to marry him instead of you.*

“Since our dear Miss Dupré jilted me at our own engagement party?” He laughed, kicking at fallen, shriveling yellowed gardenia on the sidewalk. “Well, my hiding has been intentional.”

“Is that why you have changed your hair and grown that?” She pointed to his jaw. While she normally did not favor beards, she found it suited him and hardened his boyish lines and accentuated his fine jaw.

He laughed, absentmindedly rubbing his hand over the thin beard. “Indeed. I stay buried in my work most days, as I find it helps in avoiding thinking about Willow, but whenever I resurface, I am at once reminded of my rejection.”

Her brows rose. “Oh? But your courtship took place in New York. What reminds—”

“Why, Theodore Day.” A fiery-haired woman in the same shade of gown as Flora’s, but pressed and trimmed in gold cord and puffed to perfection, hailed them with her magazine from her veranda, leaping to her feet and sending her golden, curly-haired lapdog rolling down her skirt and yipping to the floorboards in her haste. “What fortune it is that you happened to walk by while I was taking in this lovely breeze.”

Lovely breeze? Heaven help me if she is serious. Flora seized Teddy’s momentary distraction to dab at the sweat

beading above her lip with her cuff as the woman reached the wrought-iron gate that bordered her home.

“It truly is a rare summer’s day,” Theodore agreed, sending Flora’s stomach to plummeting at the thought of all her promises of fine weather turning out to be false and the ramifications that would fall upon her head for unknowingly misleading her sisters. “Miss Penelope, allow me to introduce you to one of my oldest friends in the world.”

Penelope? They are on a first-name basis? “Oldest? Surely you haven’t forgotten that I’m quite a few years younger than you.” Flora bumped him with her shoulder. “I would prefer you say I am one of your *closest* friends, Teddy dear.”

“An older acquaintance than me?” Penelope’s bottom eyelid twitched, Flora’s use of his pet name bringing about the desired irritation. “I do not recall you ever mentioning *her*.” She flicked her magazine back and forth, looking Flora up and down in a slow deliberate fashion, the wafting of her makeshift fan filling the silence. “How nice, Miss . . . ?”

Before Flora could answer, a flock of women rounded the corner, their eyes widening at the sight of him, all in various shades of rose, save a blonde in a trim walking suit of cobalt. But instead of walking around them, they flew up to Teddy, fans and eyelashes fluttering, creating an *actual* breeze. Her sisters paused behind the group, looking back to Flora as bewildered as she felt. One of the young ladies, with limp brown curls and wire-rimmed glasses, narrowed her gaze at Flora’s proximity to Teddy and promptly pressed her heel into Flora’s thin shoe. Flora yelped and scrambled back to free her toes, the woman using this time to thread her hand through Teddy’s arm.

“Mr. Day, when are you going to come to dinner? Mother

won't be kept waiting much longer, and Father is most anxious to discuss his purchasing a steamboat from you." She blinked her stubby lashes at him.

Flora squelched her retort, gripping the delicately carved handle of the parasol and fighting the urge to wallop the toe stomper with it. If this parade of Southern belles was how it had been since Teddy had returned home, she had more competition than she realized. Irritated that she hadn't thought of the notoriety of Willow Dupré's competition bringing more potential brides to his side, she glared at her assailant. She would simply have to adjust her plan after this development.

Teddy's jaw fell open. "I had no idea that he was ready to purchase, Miss Pimpernel. I thought he was still thinking about it."

"Father listens to Mother." She allowed her painted fan to slowly draw across her cheek. "And his daughters."

Flora stifled a gasp. She had enough romantic ladies in her home to know of the famed Parisian fan maker Duvelleroy's pamphlet on the language of the fan and their scandalous meanings. *Is she truly hinting that she is in love with Teddy?* She pursed her lips, thankful of Teddy's obliviousness to that little piece of coquetry.

"And we insisted a steamboat was something we need if we are to maintain our high standing in society, and that you are the only one we wish to design it," Miss Pimpernel finished.

"Then I shall send round a note, and perhaps we can arrange a meeting for this coming week. If your mother and father are agreeable, of course."

At the lift in his shoulders and bright response, Miss Pimpernel must have taken it as a sign of fondness for her as she

clutched his arm. “Our mother is always agreeable, isn’t that right, Mathilda?”

The lady in blue with a slight resemblance to Miss Pimpernel nodded but kept silent, her lovely green eyes wide, taking in the conversation. “Yes, Josephine.”

Miss Josephine Pimpernel tossed her wilted curls and cast the other three young ladies a triumphant grin as the raven-haired one in the group with a perfect figure, minus an unfortunate chin that seemed to wish to double, chose that moment to pop open her parasol, sending her rivals skittering to the side to avoid losing an eye.

“Sandrine,” Penelope chided, rolling her copy of *Harper’s Bazaar* as if she wished to throttle someone with it.

At the sharp elbow in her ribs, Flora yelped and lifted her parasol to ward off another belle, only to find Olive giving her a telling lift of the brows and miming grabbing Teddy and pointing away from the group. Knowing Olive would not rest until she acted, Flora cleared her throat, hoping to garner Teddy’s attention from the ladies, but that just served to bring a few snickers from the women surrounding him as they took yet another step closer to him, further blocking Flora from his view.

“So desperate,” whispered Miss Josephine to Miss Penelope, who hid her laugh behind her magazine before Miss Penelope tapped Miss Sandrine on the shoulder, forcing the curvaceous lady to surrender her hold on Teddy.

“But I do believe I asked you the moment you returned to port, Mr. Day, and you still haven’t given me a firm date, as you stated you did not have your diary with you and could not promise anything as yet. So I think it is only fair that you attend me before the Misses Pimpernels and Sandrine Fontenot,” Miss Penelope cooed. “Steamboat order or not.”

“I’m afraid I must attend to business before leisure, Miss Penelope and Miss Fontenot.” He tipped his hat to each lady, which Flora supposed was meant to be reassuring. Yet poor Miss Josephine Pimpernel looked as if she were about to cry at the unintentional slight, while Penelope smiled sweetly through gritted teeth.

Flora twirled her parasol impatiently, earning protests from the women about her as they gripped their chapeaus and scuttled closer to Teddy. “Come on, Tacy and Olive,” she muttered, sauntering down the sidewalk. Even though she had chased Teddy Day all the way to New Orleans, her pride wouldn’t allow her to chase him further . . . well, not today at least.