

HEARTS *on the* HEATH

# Vying FOR THE Viscount



KRISTI ANN HUNTER

RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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FOR THE  
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*To the One who knows my future  
Psalm 139:15–16*

*And to Jacob, for always helping me find  
the missing piece of my plans.*

## *Prologue*

MADRAS, INDIA  
MARCH 1817

There were many things Hudson thought he should feel, given that this was the moment he'd anticipated and prepared for his entire life, but instead of satisfaction, excitement, or even fear, all he felt was ready. Before him was the ship that would carry him to a new life. It wasn't grand or remarkable. It was simply there, ready to do its job, just like he was.

Over the past month, there had been other sensations. Momentary grief. Guilt that the grief hadn't been greater at learning of the death of a grandfather he'd never really known. Frustration that said grandfather had encouraged Hudson to stay in India instead of coming to England while the old man was still alive.

Anger at himself for listening to the man he didn't know instead of his own instincts.

Worry over what would happen given the fact that the letter he'd received meant the estate, land, tenants, stable, and horses he'd inherited had already been under the care of stewards and managers for six months and would remain that way for at least another six as he traveled.

It hadn't taken long, though, for all those feelings to fade under the weight of the fact that finally—*finally*—he was going to step into the life he'd been waiting twenty-eight years to live.

As the firstborn son of the firstborn son of the sixth Viscount Stildon, Hudson had always known his destiny. Assuming, of course, that he managed to stay alive and fulfill it.

Hiding away in India had been enough to protect Hudson from the schemes of a crazed uncle who wanted the title for himself, but it had meant exposure to other dangers. Such as the fever that had taken his mother's life when he was twelve. And the snake that had bitten and killed his father ten years later.

Now what had once seemed nothing but a vague dream was reality. Hudson was the viscount.

It was a day he'd awaited with equal parts anticipation and dread. No longer a vulnerable child, he could take his rightful place in England. He'd been raised with all the education and experience his father said he would need.

He liked India, but he had never belonged there, never had anything he felt was his own. Perhaps in a few short months, when he stepped foot on the soil of his father's birth, he would know what it was to feel acceptance.

There was nothing in India he was loath to leave behind, nothing that would make him wish to return.

In fact, all he was taking with him was contained in three chests: two large ones he wouldn't see again until the ship docked in England and one smaller one to be stored in his cabin, along with a travel cabinet that he'd been assured was a necessity for any man about to spend six months at sea.

Hudson had never been to sea, but he had roared across the plains on a galloping horse, the wind in his hair and his knees tightly gripping an unsteady seat. It was likely to be rather the same.

All he had to do was survive another six months of waiting and he would finally be home.

SOMEWHERE ON THE COAST OF AFRICA  
MONTHS LATER

He didn't know where he was, when it was, or even who he was anymore. His only certainty was that he didn't want to get back on that boat.

Of course, being off the boat wasn't much better. Despite the fact that he *knew* he was standing solidly on the ground at a port he'd forgotten the name of as soon as the captain had said it, his entire world remained unsettled.

The first time they'd stopped to take on water and supplies, Hudson had lunged for the gangplank, hoping that the shoreline would provide some relief from a middle that churned more than the water the ship cut through.

Then, as now, steady ground had provided only a modicum of relief. He was able to eat more than a few swallows at a time, and he'd been able to fill his nose with a scent other than fish and salt. Oh, how he missed being able to take a deep breath and enjoy the aroma of grass, leather, and horse.

At the second port, he'd tried staying on the ship, hoping to maintain what little adjustment he'd been able to make to the vessel's constant motion, but the heaving of a boat at dock was even worse than it had been at sea.

So this third time around, he'd gotten off. He'd focused on getting in a few hearty meals and having his shirts laundered, since he frequently sweated through them as he tossed about on his small bed in moaning misery.

Sleep was elusive, as lying down only made the room spin, so he was forced to spend his one evening ashore trying to sleep in a chair, but at least he'd strengthened his resolve enough to make it to the next port.

One port at a time and eventually, with the Lord's blessing, he'd make it to England.

The thud of quick footfalls pounded down the dock behind

Hudson, and he barely had the presence of mind to brace himself before the runner grazed his side. With a spin that sent a pounding pain spiraling through his brain and down his spine, Hudson kept himself and the boy from dropping into the water.

“Ho, there,” Hudson said, searching his throbbing brain for a name. The boy and the rest of his family were taking the same ship, along with their Indian caretaker, or *ayah*, but he hadn’t spent a great deal of time with them or any of the other handful of passengers, as he’d been too busy clinging to his bed.

“It’s a bit too far to swim to England. Better we take the ship instead.” He pulled them both from the edge, looking around for someone—anyone—to take responsibility for the lad.

The little boy, who looked the very spit of Hudson when he’d been nine or ten, grinned, seemingly unconcerned about the fact that he was alone on a dock in a strange country. “I wonder what England is like.”

“You and me both,” Hudson murmured.

Everything he’d seen on this journey, when he managed to peel open his eyes, had looked more foreign than he had anticipated. How much different would England be?

For the past twenty-eight years, the country had been nothing more than a blob on the globe, a faraway land that starred in all his father’s stories and preparations for the future. He glanced around the port. Would that blob look and sound this strange when they got there in a few very long months?

Another visual search revealed no panicked caretaker. Should he escort the boy to the ship? Was the rest of the family aboard already, assuming the boy was among them? If Jesus’ parents could leave Him behind in a synagogue, it had to be feasible for the parents of a normal human boy to misplace him.

Probably prudent to stay where he was, especially since that meant another few moments in which his world only seemed to roll about. What did one do with a boy when one could barely

think straight enough to remember one's own name, much less someone else's?

His inadvertent companion clutched a finely carved wooden horse in his arms. Hudson might not know anything about boys, but he knew God's most graceful creatures very well. He pointed at the carved animal. "Do you like horses?"

The boy nodded vigorously. "Papa bought it for me in the market. He says one day I'll have a horse just like this and I'll ride him through the park. I think I'll name him Chicken."

Hudson was still trying to come to grips with the strange name for an equine as the boy barreled on, the jumbled mess of words making it evident that he was as fascinated by horses as Hudson was. Even if he didn't yet know how to properly name one.

"Henry!" cried a female with a thick Tamil accent a few minutes later. An Indian woman rushed across the docks, two younger children in tow. She muttered under her breath about young boys with more excitement than sense, and Hudson bit his lip to smother the grin.

"Ayah, look! Papa bought me a horse." The boy proudly held his carving aloft, abandoning Hudson as if they hadn't been in the middle of a discussion about the shapes of muzzles on different breeds of horses.

A finely dressed man and woman walked up behind the harried ayah. The woman's mouth was pressed into a tight, thin line, while the man looked somewhat unsure of how to feel as he gave Hudson a nod. "Thank you for watching out for my son, Lord Stildon."

So Hudson had formally met them at some point, then. Like England, the title had been little more than a mark on paper for most of his life. It was familiar enough that he knew to answer to it, but hearing it aloud still gave him pause.

The man—a Mr. Martin, Hudson believed, though not with enough conviction to use the name—smiled indulgently down at the boy. "He's off to school, you know."

No, Hudson didn't know. Or rather, he *knew* but had never experienced. As a boy, he'd been forced to watch as his friends departed on one boat after another, bound for England and education, his friendships destined to become nothing more than a few dwindling letters.

Mr. Martin didn't seem to notice Hudson's frown. Instead, the father set a heavy hand on his son's shoulder and laughed. "Can't have a proper Englishman growing up in India without decent schooling."

Hudson rather hoped one could turn out to be a proper Englishman without an English school, but he didn't say as much. The tutors his father had hired had been competent fellows, and Hudson would put his brain up against anyone's.

The proper Englishman part was still to be determined.

"Which school?" Hudson asked because he knew how to be polite.

"Eton, just like his father." The man's chest expanded with pride.

"Of course," Hudson said. His father had gone to Eton. So had his grandfather. The best Hudson could say was that one of his tutors had taught there for a few years.

Mercifully, the captain called for them to come aboard, and Hudson allowed the family to go up in front of him in the hopes that the uncomfortable conversation went with them.

His luck, it would seem, hadn't been packed in his sparse trunks, because Mr. Martin fell back from his family to walk alongside Hudson. "What brought you to India?"

"I was born there."

The man chuckled. "And you came back? Even though ships disagree with you so?"

That assumption was far simpler than explaining he was only just now traveling to see his motherland, so Hudson didn't bother correcting the other man. "I was helping my father build up horse racing in Madras."

In truth, leaving the horses behind had been the most difficult part of his departure. With both his mother and father dead, Hudson had made the horses his life. Only the knowledge that a stable full of sweet goers was supposedly waiting for him in England made it doable.

“Where will you go once we dock?”

“Suffolk.” Though he’d had to look the place up in a book of maps, the vast green Heath was easy enough to picture, as India held several such beautiful areas. It was the grassy plain being dotted with hundreds upon hundreds of some of the finest horses in the world that Hudson couldn’t quite imagine.

Assuming, of course, that everything awaiting him hadn’t fallen to ruin in the yearlong absence of a proper owner. Had his grandfather taken the time to ensure there was something for his grandson to come home to? What if Hudson was traveling halfway across the world with the hope of finally belonging somewhere only to end up alone and aimless?

That new consideration made it almost impossible for him to tread up the gangplank and endure more weeks and months of utter torture.

Wood bit into his fingers as his grip tightened on the railing, and he narrowed his gaze on the shrinking docks as the ship went into motion. Piece by piece, building by building, the land faded away.

Was Hudson’s life doing the same thing, abandoning him to an unsteady journey to an invisible destination? Little by little, he’d learned that life would eventually take away anything outside of himself.

His childhood friends had left India behind, heading to Eton or Harrow, like the young boy from the dock, but Hudson had still had his family. After his mother’s death, he’d still had his father. Then he’d been left with the solace of horses and his reputation and abilities around the stables.

Now, Hudson had nothing but a chest of clothing that was

ill-suited to his final destination and the obligation his father had drilled into him since birth.

Father always said life was better around the next corner, but Hudson had never found anything but disappointment. His faith had grown more than a little thin.

He swallowed hard, searching himself for the strength to believe that this time, this change, would be the one that finally completed him, that finally gave him a settled peace of belonging. There was a God in heaven, and even though He hadn't answered any of Hudson's other pleas, surely He would answer this one.

If He didn't, Hudson wasn't sure which corner to turn next.

# One

The problem with life was that one's plans could be upended by the multitude of other living creatures in the world—both human and equine. The all-too-recognizable and equally unwelcome jerk of her horse nearly sent Miss Bianca Snowley tumbling to the ground. So much for a long, hard ride across the Heath to blow her problems out of her mind. She'd simply have to find that sense of peace elsewhere this morning.

With a sigh, she pulled the horse to a stop, kicked free of the stirrup, and dismounted, wincing as her foot landed on uneven ground and sent a shot of pain up her leg. She shook it out and gave the horse a reassuring pat on the neck before looping her arm through the reins.

Owen, the groom who'd been riding with her, circled his horse, Apollo, around to where she was standing. The tall former racehorse with a deep, rich chestnut coat snuffled in protest.

"I'm well, Owen," Bianca said as she set about adjusting her riding skirt for walking. "I'm afraid Atalanta isn't going anywhere but back to the stable, though."

"We'll return immediately," the groom said, shifting his weight to prepare to dismount.

Bianca stopped him with a look. It was well known that the groom tended to avoid tasks whenever possible, but would he truly

wish to give up a ride on Apollo, a beast that possessed enough power to win four of the ten races he ran a few years ago?

Of course not. Nor could Bianca allow him to make such a sacrifice for something as silly as perceived propriety. Besides, Apollo had barely managed to do more than fill his lungs with fresh air. He deserved a good long run. “We have not even reached the edge of Hawksworth’s pastures, Owen. There is no reason for both of us to miss a charge across the Heath.”

The groom frowned. “You mean to return alone, miss?”

If she couldn’t free her thoughts in the wind created by a running horse, she could at least enjoy a solitary walk with a beautiful horse at her side. It was the next best thing. “I promise to go straight back to the stable and remain there until someone returns. It’s empty but for horses right now, and I rather think I’ll enjoy their company.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but Apollo, despite being excruciatingly well trained, was starting to fidget. There was a limited window of time in which the Heath would be open for horses to run this morning, which was why all the grooms were out exercising the animals at the same time.

“Apollo needs to run, Owen.” Since it was a statement that couldn’t be argued, Bianca took Atalanta’s reins and started the short walk back to the stable.

“I’m waiting until you top the hill,” the groom grumbled.

“If that makes you feel better,” she called over her shoulder.

She rubbed a hand over her mount’s soft nose and received a jarring nudge to the shoulder in return. “If that is your version of an apology, I accept.”

After one last reassuring pat to the horse’s cream-colored neck, Bianca resumed walking, though she put a bit of space between herself and the horse in case the animal tried to apologize again. “Don’t worry, we’ll be taking that saddle off and seeing what’s wrong with you in a few short minutes. Hopefully it’s nothing but a pebble in your shoe.”

The horse nudged her shoulder once more, drawing a low chuckle from Bianca as she opened the gate and led the horse into the stable yard.

She kept a tight hold on the horse's reins, even though she expected the mare was already intent on returning to the stable. Part of the beauty of horses was their unpredictability. Of course, part of their appeal was the ability to control that volatility. She'd long ago recognized that she liked the power of having a huge animal listen to her and depend upon her.

The affection from the beasts was pleasant, too, even if it was actually a hunt for the treat they could smell in her pocket.

A masculine laugh joined hers on the air, making Bianca's feet come to a halt. There was a man in the stable. The stable that was supposed to be empty. She and Owen had been the last ones to depart fifteen minutes ago, and the household servants never ventured out to the horses.

It was possible Mr. Whitworth, the stable manager, had decided to come by today, but he would know all the grooms would be out this morning. Besides, Bianca could count on one hand the number of times she'd heard the man so much as snicker.

So, who was in the stable?

Bianca's blood surged so hard through her veins that her fingers shook as she secured Atalanta's reins to the fence that bordered the drive to the grand estate house. Was it a horse thief? A neighboring stable owner hoping to convince Mr. Whitworth to make some sort of business agreement? What if the disturbing man who had tried to take the horses after Lord Stildon died had returned?

All the moisture in her mouth turned to dust as she crossed the drive with careful steps. The loose stone shifted under her feet but didn't make much noise as long as she stayed balanced on her toes.

She was probably being an empty-headed ninny about this entire thing. Surely Mr. Whitworth's tall, broad form was going to

come into view and they'd both be able to laugh about her overactive imagination while she took care of Atalanta.

But if it *was* a thief, she would . . . she would . . . well, in all honesty, if he was after a saddle or two she'd simply let him be. She was female, after all, and while she considered herself to be quite the sportswoman, she wasn't going to claim any unusual bravery or warrior-like talents. No one could be allowed to harm the horses, though.

The door to the stable had been left open to allow fresh air to circulate into the building, so Bianca crept along the wall and peered around the edge. Despite the abundance of windows, the interior was far dimmer than the exterior, and her eyes took several moments to distinguish which shadowy shapes were supposed to be there and which weren't.

As the man came into focus, it was abundantly clear he numbered among the very out-of-place items.

Rumpled and showing signs of road dust on his boots, the man stood at Hestia's stall. The box stall door was open, and the dark brown thoroughbred was nibbling at the carrot extended toward her in one of the man's hands. The other hand held a coil of rope.

The man was attempting to steal away with Hestia.

The man—or whoever had hired him—was clever. Hestia had never run all that well, but her children were another story. She was the best mare the stable had, though currently she wasn't carrying a future champion. If someone else managed to get their hands on her and hide her away, he could benefit from the theft without the horse ever showing up at the racecourse.

Bianca couldn't let that happen. She pulled back and flattened herself against the stable wall, her breathing speeding up to match the pounding of her pulse. If Hestia left the stable with that man, they'd never see her again.

A quick glance around revealed a complete lack of anything resembling a potential weapon. In fact, it showed a complete lack

of anything at all. The front of Hawksworth stable was always kept neat, tidy, and professional. Who knew they should leave a pitchfork lying about for such an occasion as this? She'd left her riding crop tied to Atalanta's saddle, so her only options were whatever was on her person. She could not waste a moment. The man was already coaxing Hestia out of her stall.

It took a bit of tugging, and she almost fell twice, but Bianca managed to pull off her riding boot without making more noise than someone would expect from horses shifting about in their stalls. While far from a proper weapon, the heel was sturdy, and the length of the footwear gave her something to grip. It would have to do.

Hestia was depending upon Bianca and her boot.

After one more deep, steadying breath, Bianca hid the boot behind her back and entered the stable. Her gasp of pretend shock would surely have made Shakespeare cry, but it was the best she could muster. She spoke in a rush to keep the man from dwelling on the fakeness of her opening. "What do you think you're doing?"

The man paused in the middle of looping his rope around Hestia's neck. "I beg your pardon?"

Ha! As if she would pardon a horse thief, even if she could. "I asked what you thought you were doing."

Fortunately, the thick fabric of her habit disguised any trembling of her weak knees. This man could not be allowed to think she was intimidated—though she was—or that she didn't know how to actually get rid of him—though she didn't. He had to believe her a threat to his well-being if he continued with his task.

"I'm taking this horse for a walk." The man turned a questioning look to her. "What are you doing?"

So much for the hope that her mere presence would make him run. The boot it was going to have to be.

"I'm stopping you from stealing that horse." She charged forward, swinging her boot around to the front so she could hold it

like a club. Hopefully the heel that was hard enough to make a horse mind its rider was substantial enough to do damage when it connected with a human.

She swung the footwear to and fro, hitting as much of the stall wall and door as the man, but it had the desired effect of getting him to step away from the horse.

“Who—what—I say now—” The man couldn’t quite manage a sentence as he tried to shield himself from her swinging boot.

Confidence gaining with every inch that Bianca managed to drive the man back, she started to yell. “Get out of here,” she said, embracing the idea of being Hestia’s avenger. The boot nearly jerked from her hand as it solidly connected with the man’s shoulder, but Bianca held on and swung it again, aiming for his midsection this time. “Tell whoever sent you”—*swing*—“that no one”—*swing*—“steals”—*swing*—“from Hawksworth stables.”

“I’m not—” A grunt cut off the man’s sentence as the boot glanced off the back of his shoulder. He reached out, grasped the boot, and tugged, pulling Bianca into frighteningly close proximity. Close enough that he could grab her up and abscond with her, if he so chose.

Bianca brought her other boot—the one still on her foot—into play and kicked toward him. Her aim was a bit better with a kick than a swing, but she wasn’t going to be bragging about either as she kicked wildly into the air as often as she connected with his shin.

Finally, the man shoved her away and stumbled out the door. He stood on the drive, blinking at her for several moments, until Bianca started swinging her boot and screaming as she ran at him once more. She gave one more mighty swing and nearly turned herself around as the man ducked out of the way. He jerked back two steps, then turned and ran.

Bianca retreated to the stable, breath rushing in and out of her

lungs at an alarming rate, and allowed an enormous smile to split her face. She'd done it! She'd saved the horse.

Unless the man wasn't alone. What if he had companions nearby and he'd only run to get help, someone to hold her off while they stole away with Hestia?

No. Bianca would not allow that to happen. She would stand her ground.

With one eye on the door, Bianca limped over to Hestia's stall and gave the horse a strong pat on the neck as she secured her back into her stall. Then she paced awkwardly, boot held at the ready. The man might return, but he would not find these beautiful animals unprotected.

She gave an anxious glance outside as she passed the open door. The boot was all well and good, but it wouldn't hurt to send up a prayer that one of the grooms would return soon. In the meantime, it might behoove her to find a better weapon.