

#1 NEW YORK TIMES AND
USA TODAY BESTSELLER

JULIA QUINN

Just Like Heaven

The Bridgertons know the Smythe-Smiths.
Do you?

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AVON

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

*For Pam Spengler-Jaffee.
You are a goddess in every way.*

*And also for Paul,
even though when I went to him
for medical advice to save my ailing hero,
he replied, "He has to die."*

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Prologue

Marcus Holroyd was always alone.

His mother died when he was four, but this had surprisingly little effect on his life. The Countess of Chatteris mothered her son the way *her* mother had mothered her children—from afar. She was not irresponsible; she took great care and pride in finding the very best baby nurse for her husband's new heir. Miss Pimm was on the darker side of fifty and had already cared for two ducal heirs and a viscount. Lady Chatteris placed her baby into Pimm's arms, reminded the nurse that the earl could not tolerate strawberries and thus it was likely that the baby could not either, and then left to enjoy the London season.

At the time of her death, Marcus had seen his mother on precisely seven occasions.

Lord Chatteris was more fond of country life than his wife and was more frequently in residence at Fensmore, the great big rambling Tudor house in northern Cambridgeshire that had been home to the Holroyds for generations. But he fathered his son the way *his* father had fathered him. Which was to say that other than making sure the child was put atop a horse at the age of three, he didn't see any reason to bother with him until the boy was old enough to conduct a reasonably intelligent conversation.

The earl did not wish to remarry, even though he was warned that he ought to get himself a spare to go along with his heir. He looked at Marcus and saw a boy of good intelligence, excellent athleticism, and passable looks. Most importantly, he was as healthy as a horse. With no cause to suppose that Marcus might kick up and die, the earl saw no reason to subject himself to another round of wife-hunting, or even worse, another wife. He chose instead to invest in his son.

Marcus had the best tutors. He was schooled in every possible corner of a gentleman's education. He could name all the local fauna and flora. He could ride like he'd been born to a saddle, and if his fencing and shooting weren't going to win any competitions, he was still well above average. He could do lengthy products and sums without even a drop of wasted ink. He could read Latin and Greek.

By the age of twelve.

Which was, perhaps coincidentally, about the age his father decided he might be able to carry on a decent conversation.

It was also the age at which his father decided that Marcus must take the next step in his education, which was to leave Fensmore and attend Eton College, where all Holroyd boys began their formal educations. This turned out to be the most fortuitous and happy circumstance of the young boy's life. Because what Marcus Holroyd, heir to the Earldom of Chatteris, did *not* have was friends.

Not a one.

There were no appropriate boys in northern Cambridgeshire with whom Marcus might play. The closest noble family were the Crowlands, and they had only girls. The next best family was landed gentry, which would have been acceptable under the circumstances, but their sons were of entirely the wrong age. Lord Chatteris wasn't about to have his son consorting with peasants, so he simply hired more tutors. A busy boy couldn't be a lonely boy, and besides, no son of his could possibly want to run wild across the fields with the baker's rowdy brood.

If the earl had asked Marcus his opinion, he might have got a different answer. But the earl saw his son once per day, just prior to the evening meal. Their interview lasted about ten minutes, then Marcus went up to the nursery and the earl to his formal dining room, and that was that.

In retrospect, it was nothing short of remarkable that Marcus