

Praise for *The Thief of Blackfriars Lane*

Talented Michelle Griep delivers an action-packed, romantic adventure set on the dangerous streets of Victorian London.

–Julie Klassen, author of *A Castaway in Cornwall*

The Thief of Blackfriars Lane spins danger, mystery, and romance into a story sure to captivate fans of Griep’s fast-paced style. Thrilling storytelling from first page to last.

–Elizabeth Ludwig, *USA Today* bestselling author and speaker

Just when I think she can’t top the last book, Griep does it again! *The Thief of Blackfriars Lane* is spellbinding from page one until the end. Kit and Jackson will steal your breath and your heart.

–Ane Mulligan, Amazon bestselling author of *Chapel Spring Revival*

Come with me to Blackfriars Lane, run the underground rails and sewers, and if you’re the police, just try to keep up! Gosh, this book was a fun, feisty, and female-empowering story. I thoroughly enjoyed the spots of humor, the mystery, and the action. A little bit of Enola Holmes and a lotta fun!

–Jaime Jo Wright, author of Christy Award-winning *The House on Foster Hill*

Romance, crime drama, mystery, adventure, and suspense! Only this author can weave all those into one fabulous book! Add in quirky, fun characters, a heartfelt love story, and twists and turns even I didn’t see coming, and you have another bestselling page-turner from this incredible author.

–MaryLu Tyndall,

author of award-winning *Legacy of the King’s Pirates* series

Griep is such a talent and she shines in *The Thief of Blackfriars Lane*. Well-told, romantic, and clever, this is one you don’t want to miss. It will delight you!

–Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author

Sparkling with intrigue, danger, adventure, and romance, this is one of Griep’s finest stories yet! Each page drips with nail-biting suspense and pulls the reader deeper into Kit and Jackson’s world. A spellbinding tale from a master storyteller!

–Tara Johnson,

author of *Engraved on the Heart* and *Where Dandelions Bloom*

The Thief of Blackfriars Lane will take you through Victorian London, from the black-as-night sewer tunnels to glittering parties at the Lord Mayor's mansion. With Kit and Jackson as your guides, you'll be breathless to keep up with their clever intrigues. This duo sparkles on the page as they right wrongs, fight for the light, and pursue God-given purpose in every life.

—Jocelyn Green,
Christy Award–winning author of *Shadows of the White City*

A Charles Dickens-like Victorian tale full of intrigue, adventure, and romance. Delightful!

—Morgan L. Busse, author of the award-winning Ravenwood Saga

If there is an *it* quality to writing Victorian fiction, Michelle Griep has it! Action? Check! Setting? Check! Snappy dialogue? Check, check! Meticulous research meets impeccable story crafting in this fast-paced, many-layered novel. I give it an A-plus!

—Erica Vetsch, author of the Serendipity & Secrets Regency series

I've never before rooted for a thief, but Griep has magical storytelling power that will convince you to join whatever escapade she's thought up. The unexpected plot and unlikely but dynamic leads pop with the color and life of a Dickens novel, but with a style that is uniquely—and delightfully—Griep's own.

—Joanna Davidson Politano, author of *The Love Note* and other Victorian-era mysteries

Take one earnest, well-meaning but slightly bumbling hero matching wits with a nefarious female villain—or is she our heroine in disguise?—and you have the perfect recipe for a delicious romp across (and underneath) Victorian London. I loved Jackson and Kit! Too fun to miss!

—Shannon McNear, 2014 RITA® finalist
and author of *The Rebel Bride* and *The Blue Cloak*

What an absolutely delightful mystery! A fast-paced adventure through the underbelly of Victorian London led by a smart heroine you can't help but fall in love with. Exceptional research. Characters that sizzle off the page!

—Abigail Wilson, author of *Masquerade at Middlecrest Abbey*

THE THIEF OF
BLACKFRIARS
LANE

MICHELLE GRIEP

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To Cheryl Higgins and Maria Nelson, two lovely ladies
whose gardening legacy leaves the world a better place.
And as always, to the One who began time in a garden and
will someday bring those who love Him to a better place.

Chapter One

April 1885

London

For want of a properly working pocket watch, Jackson Forge failed to save the world today—or at least the City of London. Now he'd be lucky to save himself.

With no time to run a comb through his hair, Jackson flew out the door of the Hutton Street boardinghouse and entered the fray of early morning pedestrians. Of all the days to be tardy to work, this was the absolute worst. Half the City filled the streets, and the other half was likely already gathered outside St. Paul's—which stood between him and the station. State funerals always attracted attention. And criminals. A perfect opportunity to start his career off with a rousing bang. He upped his pace. Crowds or not, he'd be hanged if he arrived late for his first briefing as a newly hired constable.

But his step hitched as he turned onto Blackfriars Lane. Loaded drays, street hawkers, skirts, suits, and even a chicken or two clogged the pavement from gutter to gutter, all slowly moving towards the cathedral. The noise boxed his ears. The stink wrinkled his nose. Yet he grinned. This—*this!*—was why he'd come to London. Humanity in all its complex glory.

He plowed forward—and promptly collided with an old man in a green-checkered sack coat. The grizzly-faced fellow teetered on one foot, his beat-up bowler skewing sideways as he grabbed on to Jackson for support.

“I beg your pardon.” Jackson lent a strong arm, righting the old fellow. “I was—”

“Tut-tut, young man! I’ll tell you what you were doing.” He jammed a finger in Jackson’s chest. “You were bib-bobbing about, not caring a fig-nackety for who might be in your way. That’s the trouble with people these days. Rushing! Always rushing.”

He was right. All of Blackfriars was awchirl at the moment—but that didn’t give Jackson license to go crashing into law-abiding citizens. He dipped his head. “I stand guilty as charged, sir. But I assure you I have good reason.”

“Save your excuses for God, sonny, not me.” The man’s fingers curled around the lapel of his coat. “Now, if you don’t mind, I should like to be on my way.”

“Yes, of course.” Jackson let him pass, then drew a deep breath and once again set off at a good clip. This time he paid particular attention to what was in front of him, until a feminine voice and a tug on his sleeve turned him around.

“I believe you dropped this, sir.”

A worn leather pouch balanced on the woman’s upturned palm, drawstrings frayed at the ends. In reflex, he patted his pocket. Empty. Blast! The thing must’ve fallen out when he bumped into the old man.

The woman blinked up at him, eyes twilight blue with peculiar silver flecks. Raven hair and a tatty brown bonnet framed her heart-shaped face—a rather comely face despite a few cinder smudges. She wore a ragged gown, smelling of dust and coal smoke, and clutched the fingers of a boy who leaned into her skirts. Despite her ignoble appearance, the woman captivated like none other. Where did she and her son lay their heads at night? Were they safe? Maybe not, judging by the small triangular scar near her eye.

“Sir?”

The question snapped him back to attention. He retrieved the coin pouch and offered her a shilling from it. “For your honesty, madam. You could have simply walked on and been long gone before I noticed my purse missing, and I thank you for being forthright.”

She staved him off with a wave of her hand. “No need, sir. My boy and I do not take charity.”

What was this? Turning down money? He blinked, his tongue lying dormant. Clearly the woman and her son were in want.

“Here.” Jackson deposited the coin in the boy’s hand. “Get your mother and yourself a meat pie, hmm?”

Wide-eyed, the lad nodded, then buried his dirty face in the woman’s gown.

Rising, Jackson pulled out a sovereign. A goodly amount, one that would require weeks of hard work to replace, but this poor woman and her son were in far more need than he. Taking her hand, he pressed the money into it and curled her fingers over the coin. “For you and your boy. I will not take no for an answer.”

“Oh sir, I. . . You have no idea. . .” Her eyes shimmered, and she clutched the coin to her breast. “I cannot thank you enough. This means the world to little Frankie and me.”

“May God bless you, madam.”

The low bong of church bells filled the air, and instinctively he glanced towards the sound. Dash it! Eight o’clock. He turned back to the woman to say goodbye, but she was gone. Just as well. He didn’t have time for such niceties at the moment.

Jamming his coin pouch back into his pocket, Jackson set off at a run. He’d never be able to protect those on the street if the sergeant fired him on his first day as a constable.

He arrived at the station on Old Jewry winded and drenched in sweat, but he’d made it in only eight minutes instead of ten. A small miracle, considering. He raced up to the clerk’s desk and snapped a crisp salute before the front door slapped shut. “Constable Third Class Jackson Forge reporting for duty, sir.”

A wan man in a blue uniform lifted his face, though the way his neck cracked, the movement required much effort. Everything about him looked tired, from the flatness of his hat to the flaccid skin hanging off his neck. “Stand down, Forge. I’m only a clerk.” He

shook his head. “New recruits. . .far too young and fresh faced if you ask me.”

“I’ll have you know I’m three and twenty, sir.”

“Oh are you now?” He clicked his tongue as he paged through a sheaf of papers with painstaking lethargy. “Practically ready to be put to pasture then, eh?”

Jackson hid a smile. The man’s raillery reminded him of his outspoken father.

The clerk—Beanstaple, according to his name badge—shoved a document across the desk. “Sign that one.”

Jackson reached for a pen and scrawled his signature in record time.

The clerk tucked away the paper then glanced sidelong at a closed door across the corridor. “You’d better make haste suiting up, Constable Forge. Briefing’s already started and Sergeant Graybone don’t take kindly to latecomers.”

Beanstaple listed sideways, and for one horrid moment, Jackson worried the fellow might be suffering an apoplexy—but then he withdrew a folded uniform and a helmet from a bottom shelf. “Here you be.”

“Thank you.” He snatched the bundle before the man could eke it across the desk and took off at a good clip. Every second spent here in the lobby was one less getting briefed.

Three strides later, he paused. “Oh, uh, where should I. . . ?” He nodded at the garments.

“Sarge will eat this one for breakfast,” Beanstaple mumbled as he edged his thumb up and over his shoulder. “Last room on the right.”

Jackson dashed to the indicated chamber and peeled off his garments, tucking them into the only remaining empty cubby. Then he shoved his arms and legs into the blue woolen dream he’d clung to since boyhood. Snatching up his officer’s helmet, he snugged it under his arm and did a quick once-over in the small mirror on the wall. A white *172* was embroidered on the collar. *His* number. His

validation. The official authorization to right the wrong that had happened so many years ago.

Oh James.

After a quick smooth of his moustache, he raced back down the corridor, dipped his head at Beanstaple in gratitude, then opened the door to the briefing room and slid into a vacant seat near the rear. Rows of blue-shouldered men filled the stools to the side and in front of him. Only one gazed his way—the bear of a man at the front of the room with sergeant stripes on his sleeve. He stood impossibly rigid, a military stance. How many campaigns had this man seen before trading uniforms?

Silence fell like a sledgehammer. The sergeant shifted his gaze to the clock on the wall, then skewered Jackson with a squinty-eyed stare. “Name?”

Jackson shot to his feet and instantly cut a sharp salute. “Constable Third Class Jackson Forge, sir.”

“Forge.” The sergeant heaved out the name. “Are you able to tell time, Constable?”

Throat tight, Jackson prayed his voice wouldn’t mewl like a girl’s. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t lie to me, Forge!”

The words reverberated in his chest, loud and clear enough to be heard in battle, but despite the volume, Jackson would be deuced if he could understand the man’s meaning. He schooled his face, holding in check brows that desperately wanted to rise. “Sir?”

“Clearly, Constable, if you were able to read the hands of a clock, you’d have been here at eight, and not a minute later. But congratulations.” The sergeant clapped hands the size of kidney pies, the sharp rap of it bouncing off the walls and pelting him like grapeshot. Jackson stiffened to keep from wincing.

“You’ve just earned your first demerit.” Graybone’s clapping stopped, the absence of the noise jarring. “Two more and you’re out. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” Once again Jackson saluted, then lowered onto the stool, aware of the perspiration trickling between his shoulder blades.

The officer next to him slid a sympathetic glance his way.

“As I was saying. . .” The sergeant shot one more choleric look at Jackson, then clasped his hands behind his back while he paced the length of the front row. “Lord Twickenham’s recent disappearance makes two high-profile men unaccounted for this past week. The commissioner is calling on us, gentlemen, to not only find them, but to put a stop to this nefarious trend. I will not have our precinct tarnished, especially today when all eyes are upon us. If I so much as hear of one pickpocketing incident during the Lord Mayor’s funeral procession, you’ll all be written up. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” the officers’ voices thundered.

“Good.” The sergeant strode to a podium near the front door. “Here are your assignments. Harper, Jones.”

Two men made their way to the front, and as they did so, the fellow next to Jackson leaned sideways, speaking for him alone. “I’d wager you’ll never be late again.”

He tugged at his collar. The man had no idea how right he was. “Lesson learned.” He offered his hand. “Jackson Forge.”

“So I heard.” Amusement gleamed in the man’s brown eyes as he returned the handshake. “Charles Baggett. I think you just set a record for fastest-earned demerit.”

Jackson couldn’t help but grin. “I tend to be an overachiever.”

“You may want to rethink what you’d like to achieve.” Baggett chuckled. “Where you from, Forge?”

“Haywards Heath.”

Baggett’s brow scrunched. “Is that north?”

Jackson shook his head. “South. Nearer to Brighton than London.”

“Baggett and Williams!” the sergeant boomed.

Baggett rose at once and cuffed him on the shoulder. “Well, Forge

from Haywards Heath, good luck on your first day.”

Jackson watched the man go. Charles Baggett seemed a logical candidate for an ally, since no other man had acknowledged him.

Two by two, the room emptied until only Jackson remained. Sergeant Graybone slammed shut his ledger, tucked it on the shelf beneath the podium, then strolled towards the door.

“Sir?” Jackson rose. Surely the man hadn’t forgotten him already. “My assignment?”

“Hmm?” The sergeant’s lips pursed, his thick black moustache a dark slash against his white skin. “Oh, right. Forge. Listen, I can’t spare a First Class for you to shadow today. You’ll have to guard the station.”

The order was a yanked rug, knocking him off balance. Ever since that fateful day when he and his brother had learned firsthand the ruthlessness of London’s streets, he’d dreamed of this moment to make things right. Prevent others from falling victim to villains and cutthroats. Yet the only thing he’d be safeguarding against was a possible paper cut to Beanstaple’s fingers?

“But surely you can use me on the streets, sir. You said you’ll not tolerate so much as a pickpocket today.” He puffed out his chest. “I can do that, Sergeant. I can protect against thievery of all sorts.”

“Can you, now? Well, well, I could use a man like that.”

The knotted muscles in his shoulders untwined. Given the chance, he’d make Graybone proud.

The sergeant pulled a small paper from his pocket and handed it over. An odd size for a task sheet, an even odder place to keep it, but who was Jackson to question?

He unfolded the paper. A receipt of some sort—for a Skye Terrier puppy. He angled his face at the sergeant. “Sir?”

“I’m expecting that pup to arrive in a few hours.” Sergeant Graybone aimed a podgy finger at the invoice. “A gift for my niece. If you’re as good at protecting as you say you are, then keep that dog safe

until I arrive back at the station. Dismissed.”

The sergeant stalked to the door, leaving a slack-jawed Jackson alone with nothing but a scrap of paper in his hand and a rock of disappointment in his gut.

Chapter Two

God's mercies were new every day. Hopefully Sergeant Graybone's would be as well. With a final snug-down on his helmet and a quick flick of a straggling dog hair on his sleeve, Jackson strolled from the boardinghouse onto streets much less chaotic than yesterday. Amazing how a mere twenty-four hours could effect such a change.

Or maybe the extra tuppence he'd slipped the house matron to rap on his door before dawn was already paying off. He turned onto Blackfriars Lane. At this rate, he'd be at the station a half hour before the briefing began, despite even taking time to pen a letter home to Father. Not that he had much to write. Yet.

Ahead, a raised voice snagged his attention. He cocked his head.

"—bib-bobbing about, not caring a fig-nackety for who might be in your way. That's the trouble with people these days. Rushing! Always rushing."

Not only was the voice familiar, but the words as well. And the flash of a green-checked sack coat. Coincidence the same fellow had once again been jostled? Or could it be something a bit more devious? Jackson's eyes narrowed.

He dodged a kipper cart and ducked into a passageway between two buildings that lent a great vantage, from which he could see yet not be seen. A boon—and a curse. Too eerily like the crevice he'd hidden in thirteen years ago, when his world upended.

The old fellow finished his upbraiding then strolled down the

pavement towards Jackson. The other man continued the opposite direction. Hmm. Other than the repeated words, nothing else seemed amiss. Perhaps he'd been hasty in his assessment.

Then a woman in a brown skirt with a boy scampering beside her rendezvoused with the old man. Jackson leaned out a bit farther, every sense on alert. He knew that tatty bonnet and threadbare shawl. Recognized the smudgy cheeks on the freckle-faced lad. Confound it! Jackson had given the woman enough coin to not only clean up but find lodgings in a better part of town. Why was she still here?

From his sleeve, the old man pulled out a coin purse and transferred it to the woman—then she and the boy dashed after the fellow who had clearly been pickpocketed. When she caught up to him, she tugged on his sleeve, turning him about.

Jackson's jaw dropped. He could still feel the press of her fingers on his own arm. What a little swindler!

He set off at a dead run, and as she handed the man his wallet, Jackson caught her by the shoulder. "Your thieving days are done, madam."

The boy scampered away, and two sets of wide eyes turned to Jackson. Defiance flashed in the woman's gaze.

"Surely you are mistaken, Constable." The man hefted his leather pouch to eye level. "This woman was merely returning my property."

"This woman is a thief." Jackson tightened his grip on her collar. "Using you as a mark, setting you up for—"

Her elbow caught him sharp in the gut. He gasped. She sprang. Fabric ripped.

And the woman shot down a narrow neck of a corridor.

Shoving the handful of torn material into his pocket, Jackson charged after her. At the end of the building, she veered left, pushing over a broken cask as she went. Jackson sidestepped it. Did she truly believe her antics would hold him at bay?

"Stop in the name of the Crown!" he roared.

Her laughter bounced off the brick walls, prodding him to pump

his legs all the harder. She wouldn't be laughing for long. He was gaining on her.

Once again the woman turned, right this time. Onto a busy street. Her slim figure easily sliced between suits and skirts, skittering like a field mouse through a plot of corn. Jackson plowed after her, not nearly as graceful, and though he called out, "Stop that thief!" he took the brunt of blowback from disgruntled pedestrians.

"Nick off, bobby!"

"Watch where yer going, man!"

"Cod's heads! What an ox."

Hang it all! *She* was the criminal, not him. He lengthened his stride. "Out of my way, in the name of the Crown!"

Ahead, by the greengrocers, another figure swerved in from around the corner, joining her side. The boy. She nodded as she fled past him, and he dropped to a crouch. Surely the lad wasn't foolish enough to think he could take down a man of Jackson's size simply by springing at him.

But then the boy dashed into the street—and once again a choice must be made. Continue chasing the woman or pursue the lad? Judging by his own heaving breaths, Jackson bounded after the woman. She had to be winded, weary, and getting very wobbly of step.

From the corner of Jackson's eye, he noted the boy ran only a few steps before he crouched yet again. Strange, but—

Pain cut into Jackson's shin. The world tipped. Headlong, he whumped to the ground, shards of gravel cutting into the heels of his hands as he broke his fall. His chin scraped hard against the cobbles.

The boy laughed and scrambled away, his nearly invisible wire now tangled around Jackson's boots.

Blast!

He shook off the snare and shot to his feet, then sprinted ahead, undaunted. It would take more than a booby trap to stop him from snagging that thief. He *would* have her, and eventually the boy and the old man as well.

The lane ended in a T. The woman glanced over her shoulder at him, then dodged eastward. He tore after her. But as he rounded the corner, entering the same lane she'd taken only moments before, a scream rent the air.

"Stop! I beg you." Pain bled through the woman's words.

Confused, he slowed. She stood but twenty paces from him, clutching her stomach, somewhat doubled over. Was she hurt? Colour leached from her face, and her skirts trembled. Of all the inopportune times for the woman to take sick! Hauling a dead-weight body back to the station would be a lot harder than escorting her on her feet.

He held up his hand, as he might to a spooked mare, and softened his tone while he approached. "Allow me to help you to the station where you can receive medical help." He advanced a few more careful steps. "There will be a lesser charge if you cooperate."

"I—I don't feel so very well." Her shoulders sank.

As he studied her face for any sign of swooning, a low rumbling vibrated beneath his feet. Traveling fast. Coming closer. Hopefully the noise and jittering of the underground railway wouldn't worsen whatever ailment the woman suddenly suffered.

"We have a doctor on call at the station," he encouraged. Ten more paces and he'd have her. "I will help you and—"

She bolted. Fleet of foot. Light of step. Transforming from weak and ailing female to street rat bent on scrabbling off to her warren. Of all the ploys to slow him down! He rocketed ahead.

And was hit by a blast of steaming, sooty vapor belching up from an iron grate in the middle of the lane—a blow hole she had neatly hidden with the hem of her gown.

Jackson stumbled like a blind man, rubbing the grit from his eyes, goaded by the pain and even more by the woman's taunting voice.

"Ha-ha! Don't worry none fer me, love. Get yerself to the doctor, eh?"

Rage hotter than the blistering puff of smoke burned through his veins. Squint-blinking, Jackson charged after her, tears leaking out

the sides of his stinging eyes. The lane narrowed ahead, a perfect place to tackle her. She'd lost her chance for gentle handling.

She beat him to the opening and slipped through the gap. He barreled on, vision still watery—then stopped when the lane emptied into a market square that stretched wide and long. Dozens of brown skirts ambled about, women with baskets in hand, bending over crates of swedes and apples or haggling at stalls. Jackson rubbed his eyes, and though his vision cleared, the action did nothing to distinguish one feisty swindler in a tatty bonnet from the vast sea of shoppers who looked exactly the same. It would take him forever to find her in this crowd.

And by now, time was surely not his friend. Sergeant Graybone would show no mercy were he late again.

Defeat tasted as acrid as the blast of steam, though he tried to swallow it down as he trudged to the station. What kind of constable couldn't apprehend a woman? Maybe it would be better to just turn in his uniform now before anyone realized how ill-suited he really was for this job, no matter how much he wanted it. The sergeant already suspected his incompetence anyway.

Jackson scrubbed a hand over his face. His fingers came away black, and he winced. He probably looked no better than a chimney sweep on a bad day. Wouldn't the sergeant love that?

He fished about for a handkerchief, but instead he pulled out the scrap of fabric he'd torn from the woman's collar. There, tangled in the piece, was a broken chain with a curious token attached. He narrowed his eyes, studying the worn bit of brass. It was a button, shiny on one side, tarnished on the other. Two letters and a date were engraved on the back: H.G. 1854. And on the front, a few embossed words. "*Nulli Secundus.*" Second to none. The slogan of the Coldstream Guards, if he remembered correctly.

He shoved the handful back into his pocket and eased out his own cloth, wiping the remnants of soot, sweat, and a smear of blood from his chin while his mind whirred.

Why would a woman wear such a thing near her heart? Did it belong to a lover? A brother? A father? Not that it mattered. What did matter was now he had a link to the little thief. Finding the button's owner would bring him one step closer to locating the woman and her accomplices. And when he brought in all three, he'd be vindicated.

Now that would be something to write home about.