

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIA QUINN



AVON
BOOKS

2ND
EPILOGUE
INCLUDED!

ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON



JULIA
QUINN

ROMANCING
MISTER
BRIDGERTON



AVONBOOKS

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Dedication

*For the women on avonloop,
colleagues and friends all—
thanks for giving me someone to talk to all day long.
Your support and friendship
have meant more to me than I could ever say.*

*And for Paul, even though the closest thing
you'd ever find to a romance in his field
is a lecture called "The Kiss of Death."*

Acknowledgments

*With utmost thanks to Lisa Kleypas and Stephanie Laurens
for the gracious use of their characters.*

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Prologue

On the sixth of April, in the year 1812—precisely two days before her sixteenth birthday—Penelope Featherington fell in love.

It was, in a word, thrilling. The world shook. Her heart leaped. The moment was breathtaking. And, she was able to tell herself with some satisfaction, the man in question—one Colin Bridgerton—felt precisely the same way.

Oh, not the love part. He certainly didn't fall in love with her in 1812 (and not in 1813, 1814, 1815, or—oh, blast, not in all the years 1816–1822, either, and certainly not in 1823, when he was out of the country the whole time, anyway). But his earth shook, his heart leaped, and Penelope knew without a shadow of a doubt that his breath was taken away as well. For a good ten seconds.

Falling off a horse tended to do that to a man.

It happened thus:

She'd been out for a walk in Hyde Park with her mother and two older sisters when she felt a thunderous rumbling under her feet (see above: the bit about the earth shaking). Her mother wasn't paying much attention to her (her mother rarely did), so Penelope slipped away for a moment to see what was about. The rest of the Featheringtons were in rapt conversation with Viscountess Bridgerton and her daughter Daphne, who had just begun her second season in London, so they were pretending to ignore the rumbling. The Bridgertons were an important family indeed, and conversations with them were *not* to be ignored.

As Penelope skirted around the edge of a particularly fat-trunked tree, she saw two riders coming her way, galloping along hell-for-leather or whatever expression people liked to use for fools on horseback who care not for their safety and well-being. Penelope felt her heart quicken (it would have been difficult to maintain a sedate pulse as a witness to such excitement, and besides, this allowed her to say that her heart leaped when she fell in love).

Then, in one of those inexplicable quirks of fate, the wind picked up

quite suddenly and lifted her bonnet (which, much to her mother's chagrin, she had not tied properly since the ribbon chafed under her chin) straight into the air and, splat! right onto the face of one of the riders.

Penelope gasped (taking her breath away!), and then the man fell off his horse, landing most inelegantly in a nearby mud puddle.

She rushed forward, quite without thinking, squealing something that was meant to inquire after his welfare, but that she suspected came out as nothing more than a strangled shriek. He would, of course, be furious with her, since she'd effectively knocked him off his horse and covered him with mud—two things guaranteed to put any gentleman in the foulest of moods. But when he finally rose to his feet, brushing off whatever mud could be dislodged from his clothing, he didn't lash out at her. He didn't give her a stinging set-down, he didn't yell, he didn't even glare.

He laughed.

He laughed.

Penelope hadn't much experience with the laughter of men, and what little she *had* known had not been kind. But this man's eyes—a rather intense shade of green—were filled with mirth as he wiped a rather embarrassingly placed spot of mud off his cheek and said, "Well, that wasn't very well done of me, was it?"

And in that moment, Penelope fell in love.

When she found her voice (which, she was pained to note, was a good three seconds after a person of any intelligence would have replied), she said, "Oh, no, it is I who should apologize! My bonnet came right off my head, and . . ."

She stopped talking when she realized he hadn't actually apologized, so there was little point in contradicting him.

"It was no trouble," he said, giving her a somewhat amused smile. "I—Oh, good day, Daphne! Didn't know you were in the park."

Penelope whirled around to find herself facing Daphne Bridgerton, standing next to her mother, who promptly hissed, "What have you done, Penelope Featherington?" and Penelope couldn't even answer with her stock, *Nothing*, because in truth, the accident was completely her fault, and she'd just made a fool of herself in front of what was obviously—judging from the expression on her mother's face—a very eligible bachelor indeed.

Not that her mother would have thought that *she* had a chance with him. But Mrs. Featherington held high matrimonial hopes for her older girls. Besides, Penelope wasn't even "out" in society yet.

But if Mrs. Featherington intended to scold her any further, she was unable to do so, because that would have required that she remove her

attention from the all-important Bridgertons, whose ranks, Penelope was quickly figuring out, included the man presently covered in mud.

“I hope your son isn’t injured,” Mrs. Featherington said to Lady Bridgerton.

“Right as rain,” Colin interjected, making an expert sidestep before Lady Bridgerton could maul him with motherly concern.

Introductions were made, but the rest of the conversation was unimportant, mostly because Colin quickly and accurately sized up Mrs. Featherington as a matchmaking mama. Penelope was not at all surprised when he beat a hasty retreat.

But the damage had already been done. Penelope had discovered a reason to dream.

Later that night, as she replayed the encounter for about the thousandth time in her mind, it occurred to her that it would have been nice if she could have said that she’d fallen in love with him as he kissed her hand before a dance, his green eyes twinkling devilishly while his fingers held hers just a little more tightly than was proper. Or maybe it could have happened as he rode boldly across a windswept moor, the (aforementioned) wind no deterrent as he (or rather, his horse) galloped ever closer, his (Colin’s, not the horse’s) only intention to reach her side.

But no, she had to go and fall in love with Colin Bridgerton when he fell off a horse and landed on his bottom in a mud puddle. It was highly irregular, and *highly* unromantic, but there was a certain poetic justice in that, since nothing was ever going to come of it.

Why waste romance on a love that would never be returned? Better to save the windswept-moor introductions for people who might actually have a future together.

And if there was one thing Penelope knew, even then, at the age of sixteen years minus two days, it was that her future did not feature Colin Bridgerton in the role of husband.

She simply wasn’t the sort of girl who attracted a man like him, and she feared that she never would be.

On the tenth of April, in the year 1813—precisely two days after her seventeenth birthday—Penelope Featherington made her debut into London society. She hadn’t wanted to do it. She begged her mother to let her wait a year. She was at least two stone heavier than she ought to be, and her face still had an awful tendency to develop spots whenever she was nervous, which meant that she *always* had spots, since nothing in the world could make her as nervous as a London ball.

She tried to remind herself that beauty was only skin deep, but that didn't offer any helpful excuses when she was berating herself for never knowing what to say to people. There was nothing more depressing than an ugly girl with no personality. And in that first year on the marriage mart, that was exactly what Penelope was. An ugly girl with no—oh, very well, she had to give herself *some* credit—with very little personality.

Deep inside, she knew who she was, and that person was smart and kind and often even funny, but somehow her personality always got lost somewhere between her heart and her mouth, and she found herself saying the wrong thing or, more often, nothing at all.

To make matters even less attractive, Penelope's mother refused to allow Penelope to choose her own clothing, and when she wasn't in the requisite white that most young ladies wore (and which of course didn't flatter her complexion one bit), she was forced to wear yellow and red and orange, all of which made her look perfectly wretched. The one time Penelope had suggested green, Mrs. Featherington had planted her hands on her more-than-ample hips and declared that green was too melancholy.

Yellow, Mrs. Featherington declared, was a *happy* color and a *happy* girl would snare a husband.

Penelope decided then and there that it was best not to try to understand the workings of her mother's mind.

So Penelope found herself outfitted in yellow and orange and the occasional red, even though such colors made her look decidedly *unhappy*, and in fact were positively ghastly with her brown eyes and red-tinged hair. There was nothing she could do about it, though, so she decided to grin and bear it, and if she couldn't manage a grin, at least she wouldn't cry in public.

Which, she took some pride in noting, she never did.

And if that weren't enough, 1813 was the year that the mysterious (and fictitious) Lady Whistledown began publishing her thrice-weekly *Society Papers*. The single-sheet newspaper became an instant sensation. No one knew who Lady Whistledown really was, but everyone seemed to have a theory. For weeks—no, months, really—London could speak of nothing else. The paper had been delivered for free for two weeks—just long enough to addict the *ton*—and then suddenly there was no delivery, just paperboys charging the outrageous price of five pennies a paper.

But by then, no one could live without the almost-daily dose of gossip, and everyone paid their pennies.

Somewhere some woman (or maybe, some people speculated, some man) was growing very rich indeed.

What set *Lady Whistledown's Society Papers* apart from any previous society newssheets was that the author actually listed her subjects' names in full. There was no hiding behind abbreviations such as Lord P—or Lady B—. If Lady Whistledown wanted to write about someone, she used his full name.

And when Lady Whistledown wanted to write about Penelope Featherington, she did. Penelope's first appearance in *Lady Whistledown's Society Papers* went as follows:

Miss Penelope Featherington's unfortunate gown left the unfortunate girl looking like nothing more than an overripe citrus fruit.

A rather stinging blow, to be sure, but nothing less than the truth. Her second appearance in the column was no better.

Not a word was heard from Miss Penelope Featherington, and no wonder! The poor girl appeared to have drowned amidst the ruffles of her dress.

Not, Penelope was afraid, anything that would enhance her popularity.

But the season wasn't a complete disaster. There were a few people with whom she seemed able to speak. Lady Bridgerton, of all people, took a liking to her, and Penelope found that she could often tell things to the lovely viscountess that she would never dream of saying to her own mother. It was through Lady Bridgerton that she met Eloise Bridgerton, the younger sister of her beloved Colin. Eloise was also just turned seventeen, but her mother had wisely allowed her to delay her debut by a year, even though Eloise possessed the Bridgerton good looks and charm in abundance.

And while Penelope spent her afternoons in the green-and-cream drawing room at Bridgerton House (or, more often, up in Eloise's bedchamber where the two girls laughed and giggled and discussed everything under the sun with great earnestness), she found herself coming into occasional contact with Colin, who at two-and-twenty had not yet moved out of the family home and into bachelor lodgings.

If Penelope had thought she loved him before, that was nothing compared to what she felt after actually getting to know him. Colin Bridgerton was witty, he was dashing, he had a devil-may-care jokester quality to him that made women swoon, but most of all . . .

Colin Bridgerton was nice.

Nice. Such a silly little word. It should have been banal, but somehow it fit him to perfection. He always had something nice to say to Penelope, and when she finally worked up the courage to say something back (other than the very basic greetings and farewells), he actually listened. Which made it all the easier the next time around.

By the end of the season, Penelope judged that Colin Bridgerton was the only man with whom she'd managed an entire conversation.

This was love. Oh, this was love love love love love love. A silly repetition of words, perhaps, but that was precisely what Penelope doodled on a ridiculously expensive sheet of writing paper, along with the words, "Mrs. Colin Bridgerton" and "Penelope Bridgerton" and "Colin Colin Colin." (The paper went into the fire the moment Penelope heard footsteps in the hall.)

How wonderful it was to feel love—even the one-sided sort—for a nice person. It made one feel so positively sensible.

Of course, it didn't hurt that Colin possessed, as did all the Bridgerton men, fabulous good looks. There was that famous Bridgerton chestnut hair, the wide and smiling Bridgerton mouth, the broad shoulders, the six-foot height, and in Colin's case, the most devastating green eyes ever to grace a human face.

They were the sort of eyes that haunted a girl's dreams.

And Penelope dreamed and dreamed and dreamed.

April of 1814 found Penelope back in London for a second season, and even though she attracted the same number of suitors as the year before (zero), the season wasn't, in all honesty, quite so bad. It helped that she'd lost nearly two stone and could now call herself "pleasantly rounded" rather than "a hideous pudge." She was still nowhere near the slender ideal of womanhood that ruled the day, but at least she'd changed enough to warrant the purchase of a completely new wardrobe.

Unfortunately, her mother once again insisted on yellow, orange, and the occasional splash of red. And this time, Lady Whistledown wrote:

Miss Penelope Featherington (the least inane of the Featherington sisters) wore a gown of lemon yellow that left a sour taste in one's mouth.

Which at least seemed to imply that Penelope was the most intelligent member of her family, although the compliment was backhanded, indeed.

But Penelope wasn't the only one singled out by the acerbic gossip

columnist. Dark-haired Kate Sheffield was likened to a singed daffodil in her yellow dress, and Kate went on to marry Anthony Bridgerton, Colin's older brother and a viscount to boot!

So Penelope held out hope.

Well, not really. She knew Colin wasn't going to marry her, but at least he danced with her at every ball, and he made her laugh, and every now and then she made him laugh, and she knew that that would have to be enough.

And so Penelope's life continued. She had her third season, then her fourth. Her two older sisters, Prudence and Philippa, finally found husbands of their own and moved away. Mrs. Featherington held out hope that Penelope might still make a match, since it had taken both Prudence and Philippa five seasons to snare husbands, but Penelope knew that she was destined to remain a spinster. It wouldn't be fair to marry someone when she was still so desperately in love with Colin. And maybe, in the far reaches of her mind—in the farthest-back corner, tucked away behind the French verb conjugations she'd never mastered and the arithmetic she never used—she still held out a tiny shred of hope.

Until *that* day.

Even now, seven years later, she still referred to it as *that* day.

She'd gone to the Bridgerton household, as she frequently did, to take tea with Eloise and her mother and sisters. It was right before Eloise's brother Benedict had married Sophie, only he didn't know who she really was, and—well, that didn't signify, except that it may have been the one truly great secret in the last decade that Lady Whistledown had never managed to unearth.

Anyway, she was walking through the front hall, listening to her feet tap along the marble tile as she saw herself out. She was adjusting her pelisse and preparing to walk the short distance to her own home (just around the corner, really) when she heard voices. Male voices. Male Bridgerton voices.

It was the three elder Bridgerton brothers: Anthony, Benedict, and Colin. They were having one of those conversations that men have, the kind in which they grumble a lot and poke fun at each other. Penelope had always liked to watch the Bridgertons interact in this manner; they were such a *family*.

Penelope could see them through the open front door, but she couldn't hear what they were saying until she'd reached the threshold. And in a testament to the bad timing that had plagued her throughout her life, the

first voice she heard was Colin's, and the words were not kind.

“. . . and I am certainly not going to marry Penelope Featherington!”

“Oh!” The word slipped over her lips before she could even think, the squeal of it piercing the air like an off-key whistle.

The three Bridgerton men turned to face her with identical horrified faces, and Penelope knew that she had just entered into what would certainly be the most awful five minutes of her life.

She said nothing for what seemed like an eternity, and then, finally, with a dignity she never dreamed she possessed, she looked straight at Colin and said, “I never asked you to marry me.”

His cheeks went from pink to red. He opened his mouth, but not a sound came out. It was, Penelope thought with wry satisfaction, probably the only time in his life he'd ever been at a loss for words.

“And I never—” She swallowed convulsively. “I never said to anyone that I wanted you to ask me.”

“Penelope,” Colin finally managed, “I'm so sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she said.

“No,” he insisted, “I do. I hurt your feelings, and—”

“You didn't know I was there.”

“But nevertheless—”

“You are not going to marry me,” she said, her voice sounding very strange and hollow to her ears. “There is nothing wrong with that. I am not going to marry your brother Benedict.”

Benedict had clearly been trying not to look, but he snapped to attention at that.

Penelope fisted her hands at her sides. “It doesn't hurt his feelings when I announce that I am not going to marry him.” She turned to Benedict, forcing her eyes directly on his. “Does it, Mr. Bridgerton?”

“Of course not,” Benedict answered quickly.

“It's settled, then,” she said tightly, amazed that, for once, *exactly* the right words were coming out of her mouth. “No feelings were hurt. Now, then, if you will excuse me, gentlemen, I should like to go home.”

The three gentlemen immediately stood back to let her pass, and she would have made a clean escape, except that Colin suddenly blurted out, “Don't you have a maid?”

She shook her head. “I live just around the corner.”

“I know, but—”

“I'll escort you,” Anthony said smoothly.

“That's really not necessary, my lord.”

“Humor me,” he said, in a tone that told her quite clearly she hadn't any

choice in the matter.

She nodded, and the two of them took off down the street. After they had passed about three houses, Anthony said in a strangely respectful voice, “He didn’t know you were there.”

Penelope felt her lips tighten at the corners—not out of anger, just out of a weary sense of resignation. “I know,” she replied. “He’s not the sort to be cruel. I expect your mother has been hounding him to get married.”

Anthony nodded. Lady Bridgerton’s intentions to see each and every one of her eight offspring happily married were legendary.

“She likes me,” Penelope said. “Your mother, that is. She can’t see beyond that, I’m afraid. But the truth is, it doesn’t matter so much if she likes Colin’s bride.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say *that*,” Anthony mused, sounding not so much like a highly feared and respected viscount and rather more like a well-behaved son. “I shouldn’t like to be married to someone my mother didn’t like.” He shook his head in a gesture of great awe and respect. “She’s a force of nature.”

“Your mother or your wife?”

He considered that for about half a second. “Both.”

They walked for a few moments, and then Penelope blurted out, “Colin should go away.”

Anthony eyed her curiously. “I beg your pardon?”

“He should go away. Travel. He’s not ready to marry, and your mother won’t be able to restrain herself from pressuring him. She means well. . . .” Penelope bit her lip in horror. She hoped the viscount didn’t think she was actually criticizing Lady Bridgerton. As far as she was concerned, there was no greater lady in England.

“My mother always means well,” Anthony said with an indulgent smile. “But maybe you’re right. Perhaps he should get away. Colin does enjoy travel. Although he did just return from Wales.”

“Did he?” Penelope murmured politely, as if she didn’t know perfectly well that he’d been in Wales.

“Here we are,” he said as he nodded his reply. “This is your house, is it not?”

“Yes. Thank you for accompanying me home.”

“It was my pleasure, I assure you.”

Penelope watched as he left, then she went inside and cried.

The very next day, the following account appeared in *Lady Whistledown’s Society Papers*:

La, but such excitement yesterday on the front steps of Lady Bridgerton's residence on Bruton Street!

First, Penelope Featherington was seen in the company of not one, not two, but THREE Bridgerton brothers, surely a heretofore impossible feat for the poor girl, who is rather infamous for her wallflower ways. Sadly (but perhaps predictably) for Miss Featherington, when she finally departed, it was on the arm of the viscount, the only married man in the bunch.

If Miss Featherington were to somehow manage to drag a Bridgerton brother to the altar, it would surely mean the end of the world as we know it, and This Author, who freely admits she would not know heads from tails in such a world, would be forced to resign her post on the spot.

It seemed even Lady Whistledown understood the futility of Penelope's feelings for Colin.

The years drifted by, and somehow, without realizing it, Penelope ceased to be a debutante and found herself sitting with the chaperones, watching her younger sister Felicity—surely the only Featherington sister blessed with both natural beauty and charm—enjoying her own London seasons.

Colin developed a taste for travel and began to spend more and more time outside of London; it seemed that every few months he was off to some new destination. When he was in town, he always saved a dance and a smile for Penelope, and somehow she managed to pretend that nothing had ever happened, that he'd never declared his distaste for her on a public street, that her dreams had never been shattered.

And when he was in town, which wasn't often, they seemed to settle into an easy, if not terribly deep, friendship. Which was all an almost twenty-eight-year-old spinster could hope for, right?

Unrequited love was never easy, but at least Penelope Featherington was used to it.

Chapter 1

Matchmaking mamas are united in their glee—Colin Bridgerton has returned from Greece!

For those gentle (and ignorant) readers who are new to town this year, Mr. Bridgerton is third in the legendary string of eight Bridgerton siblings (hence the name Colin, beginning with C; he follows Anthony and Benedict, and precedes Daphne, Eloise, Francesca, Gregory, and Hyacinth).

Although Mr. Bridgerton holds no noble title and is unlikely ever to do so (he is seventh in line for the title of Viscount Bridgerton, behind the two sons of the current viscount, his elder brother Benedict, and his three sons) he is still considered one of the prime catches of the season, due to his fortune, his face, his form, and most of all, his charm. It is difficult, however, to predict whether Mr. Bridgerton will succumb to matrimonial bliss this season; he is certainly of an age to marry (three-and-thirty), but he has never shown a decided interest in any lady of proper parentage, and to make matters even more complicated, he has an appalling tendency to leave London at the drop of a hat, bound for some exotic destination.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 2 APRIL 1824

“**L**ook at this!” Portia Featherington squealed. “Colin Bridgerton is back!”

Penelope looked up from her needlework. Her mother was clutching the latest edition of *Lady Whistledown's Society Papers* the way Penelope might clutch, say, a rope while hanging off a building. “I know,” she murmured.

Portia frowned. She hated when someone—anyone—was aware of gossip before she was. “How did you get to *Whistledown* before I did? I told Briarly to set it aside for me and not to let anyone touch—”

“I didn't see it in *Whistledown*,” Penelope interrupted, before her mother went off to castigate the poor, beleaguered butler. “Felicity told me. Yesterday afternoon. Hyacinth Bridgerton told her.”

“Your sister spends a great deal of time over at the Bridgerton household.”

“As do I,” Penelope pointed out, wondering where this was leading.

Portia tapped her finger against the side of her chin, as she always did when she was plotting or scheming. “Colin Bridgerton is of an age to be looking for a wife.”

Penelope managed to blink just before her eyes bugged right out of her head. “Colin Bridgerton is not going to marry Felicity!”

Portia gave a little shrug. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Not that I’ve ever seen,” Penelope muttered.

“Anthony Bridgerton married that Kate Sheffield girl, and she was even less popular than *you*.”

That wasn’t exactly true; Penelope rather thought they’d been on equally low rungs of the social ladder. But there seemed little point in telling this to her mother, who probably thought she’d complimented her third daughter by saying she’d not been the least popular girl that season.

Penelope felt her lips tightening. Her mother’s “compliments” had a habit of landing rather like wasps.

“Do not think I mean to criticize,” Portia said, suddenly all concern. “In truth, I am glad for your spinsterhood. I am alone in this world save for my daughters, and it’s comforting to know that one of you shall be able to care for me in my older years.”

Penelope had a vision of the future—the future as described by her mother—and she had a sudden urge to run out and marry the chimney sweep. She’d long since resigned herself to a life of eternal spinsterhood, but somehow she’d always pictured herself off in her own neat little terrace house. Or maybe a snug cottage by the sea.

But lately Portia had been peppering her conversations with references to her old age and how lucky she was that Penelope could care for her. Never mind that both Prudence and Philippa had married well-heeled men and possessed ample funds to see to their mother’s every comfort. Or that Portia was moderately wealthy in her own right; when her family had settled money on her as a dowry, one-fourth had been set aside for her own personal account.

No, when Portia talked about being “cared for,” she wasn’t referring to money. What Portia wanted was a slave.

Penelope sighed. She was being overly harsh with her mother, if only in her own mind. She did that too often. Her mother loved her. She knew her mother loved her. And she loved her mother back.

It was just that sometimes she didn’t much *like* her mother.

She hoped that didn't make her a bad person. But truly, her mother could try the patience of even the kindest, gentlest of daughters, and as Penelope was the first to admit, she could be a wee bit sarcastic at times.

"Why don't you think Colin would marry Felicity?" Portia asked.

Penelope looked up, startled. She'd thought they were done with that subject. She should have known better. Her mother was nothing if not tenacious. "Well," she said slowly, "to begin with, she's twelve years younger than he is."

"Pfft," Portia said, waving her hand dismissively. "That's nothing, and you know it."

Penelope frowned, then yelped as she accidentally stabbed her finger with her needle.

"Besides," Portia continued blithely, "he's"—she looked back down at *Whistledown* and scanned it for his exact age—"three-and-thirty! How is he meant to avoid a twelve-year difference between him and his wife? Surely you don't expect him to marry someone *your* age."

Penelope sucked on her abused finger even though she knew it was hopelessly uncouth to do so. But she needed to put something in her mouth to keep her from saying something horrible *and* horribly spiteful.

Everything her mother said was true. Many *ton* weddings—maybe even most of them—saw men marrying girls a dozen or more years their junior. But somehow the age gap between Colin and Felicity seemed even larger, perhaps because . . .

Penelope was unable to keep the disgust off her face. "She's like a sister to him. A little sister."

"Really, Penelope. I hardly think—"

"It's almost incestuous," Penelope muttered.

"What did you say?"

Penelope snatched up her needlework again. "Nothing."

"I'm sure you said something."

Penelope shook her head. "I did clear my throat. Perhaps you heard—"

"I heard you saying something. I'm sure of it!"

Penelope groaned. Her life loomed long and tedious ahead of her. "Mother," she said, with the patience of, if not a saint, at least a very devout nun, "Felicity is practically engaged to Mr. Albansdale."

Portia actually began rubbing her hands together. "She won't be engaged to him if she can catch Colin Bridgerton."

"Felicity would *die* before chasing after Colin."

"Of course not. She's a smart girl. Anyone can see that Colin Bridgerton is a better catch."

“But Felicity loves Mr. Albansdale!”

Portia deflated into her perfectly upholstered chair. “There is that.”

“And,” Penelope added with great feeling, “Mr. Albansdale is in possession of a perfectly respectable fortune.”

Portia tapped her index finger against her cheek. “True. Not,” she said sharply, “as respectable as a Bridgerton portion, but it’s nothing to sneeze at, I suppose.”

Penelope knew it was time to let it go, but she couldn’t stop her mouth from opening one last time. “In all truth, Mother, he’s a wonderful match for Felicity. We should be delighted for her.”

“I know, I know,” Portia grumbled. “It’s just that I so wanted one of my daughters to marry a Bridgerton. What a coup! I would be the talk of London for weeks. Years, maybe.”

Penelope stabbed her needle into the cushion beside her. It was a rather foolish way to vent her anger, but the alternative was to jump to her feet and yell, *What about me?* Portia seemed to think that once Felicity was wed, her hopes for a Bridgerton union were forever dashed. But Penelope was still unmarried—didn’t that count for anything?

Was it so much to wish that her mother thought of her with the same pride she felt for her other three daughters? Penelope knew that Colin wasn’t going to choose her as his bride, but shouldn’t a mother be at least a little bit blind to her children’s faults? It was obvious to Penelope that neither Prudence, Philippa, nor even Felicity had ever had a chance with a Bridgerton. Why did her mother seem to think their charms so exceeded Penelope’s?

Very well, Penelope had to admit that Felicity enjoyed a popularity that exceeded that of her three older sisters combined. But Prudence and Philippa had never been Incomparables. They’d hovered on the perimeters of ballrooms just as much as Penelope had.

Except, of course, that they were married now. Penelope wouldn’t have wanted to cleave herself unto either of their husbands, but at least they were wives.

Thankfully, however, Portia’s mind had already moved on to greener pastures. “I must pay a call upon Violet,” she was saying. “She’ll be so relieved that Colin is back.”

“I’m sure Lady Bridgerton will be delighted to see you,” Penelope said.

“That poor woman,” Portia said, her sigh dramatic. “She worries about him, you know—”

“I know.”

“Truly, I think it is more than a mother should be expected to bear. He