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JULIA
QUINN

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JULIA
QUINN

THE
BRIDGERTONS:
Happily Ever After



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Dedication

*For my readers,
who never stopped asking,
“And then what happened?”*

*And also for Paul,
who never stopped saying,
“What a great idea!”*

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Dear Reader—

Have you ever wondered what happened to your favorite characters after you closed the final page? Wanted just a little bit more of a favorite novel? I have, and if my conversations with readers are any indication, I'm not the only one. So after countless requests, I revisited the Bridgerton novels, and gave each one a "2nd" epilogue—the story that comes *after* the story.

For those of you who have not read the Bridgerton novels, I would caution you that some of these 2nd epilogues might not make much sense without having read the accompanying novel. For those of you who have read the Bridgerton novels, I hope you enjoy reading these short stories as much as I have enjoyed writing them.

Warmly,
Julia Quinn



The Duke and I

Midway through *The Duke and I*, Simon refuses to accept a bundle of letters written to him by his late estranged father. Daphne, anticipating that he might someday change his mind, takes the letters and hides them, but when she offers them to Simon at the end of the book, he decides not to open them. I hadn't originally intended for him to do this; I'd always figured there would be something great and important in those letters. But when Daphne held them out, it became clear to me that Simon didn't need to read his father's words. It finally didn't matter what the late duke had thought of him.

Readers wanted to know what was in the letters, but I must confess: I did not. What interested me was what it would take to make Simon *want* to read them . . .



The Duke and I: The 2nd Epilogue

Mathematics had never been Daphne Basset's best subject, but she could certainly count to thirty, and as thirty was the maximum number of days that usually elapsed between her monthly courses, the fact that she was currently looking at her desk calendar and counting to forty-three was cause for some concern.

"It can't be possible," she said to the calendar, half expecting it to reply. She sat down slowly, trying to recall the events of the past six weeks. Maybe she'd counted wrong. She'd bled while she was visiting her mother, and that had been on March twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth, which meant that . . . She counted again, physically this time, poking each square on the calendar with her index finger.

Forty-three days.

She was pregnant.

"Good God."

Once again, the calendar had little to say on the matter.

No. No, it couldn't be. She was forty-one years old. Which wasn't to say that no woman in the history of the world had given birth at forty-two, but it had been seventeen years since she'd last conceived. Seventeen years of rather delightful relations with her husband during which time they had done nothing—absolutely nothing—to block conception.

Daphne had assumed she was simply done being fertile. She'd had her four children in rapid succession, one a year for the first four years of her marriage. Then . . . nothing.

She had been surprised when she realized that her youngest had reached his first birthday, and she was not pregnant again. And then he was two, then three, and her belly remained flat, and Daphne looked at her brood—Amelia, Belinda, Caroline, and David—and decided she had been blessed beyond measure. Four children, healthy and strong, with a strapping little boy who would one day take his father's place as the Duke of Hastings.

Besides, Daphne did not particularly enjoy being pregnant. Her ankles swelled and her cheeks got puffy, and her digestive tract did things that she absolutely did not wish to experience again. She thought of her sister-in-law Lucy, who positively glowed throughout pregnancy—which was a good thing, as Lucy was currently fourteen months pregnant with her fifth child.

Or nine months, as the case might be. But Daphne had seen her just a few days earlier, and she *looked* as if she were fourteen months along.

Huge. Staggeringly huge. But still glowing, and with astonishingly dainty ankles.

“I can’t be pregnant,” Daphne said, placing a hand on her flat belly. Maybe she was going through the change. Forty-one did seem a bit young, but then again, it wasn’t one of those things anyone ever talked about. Maybe lots of women stopped their monthly courses at forty-one.

She should be happy. Grateful. Really, bleeding was such a bother.

She heard footsteps coming toward her in the hallway, and she quickly slid a book on top of the calendar, although what she thought she might be hiding she had no idea. It was just a calendar. There was no big red X, followed by the notation, “Bled this day.”

Her husband strode into the room. “Oh good, there you are. Amelia has been looking for you.”

“For me?”

“If there is a merciful God, she is not looking for *me*,” Simon returned.

“Oh, dear,” Daphne murmured. Normally she’d have a more quick-witted response, but her mind was still in the possibly-pregnant-possibly-growing-very-old fog.

“Something about a dress.”

“The pink one or the green one?”

Simon stared at her. “Really?”

“No, of course you wouldn’t know,” she said distractedly.

He pressed his fingers to his temples and sank into a nearby chair. “When will she be married?”

“Not until she’s engaged.”

“And when will that be?”

Daphne smiled. “She had five proposals last year. You were the one who insisted that she hold out for a love match.”

“I did not hear you disagreeing.”

“I did not disagree.”

He sighed. “How is it we have managed to have three girls out in society at the same time?”

“Procreative industriousness at the outset of our marriage,” Daphne answered pertly, then remembered the calendar on her desk. The one with the red X that no one could see but her.

“Industriousness, hmmm?” He glanced over at the open door. “An interesting choice of words.”

She took one look at his expression and felt herself turn pink. “Simon, it’s the middle of the day!”

His lips slid into a slow grin. “I don’t recall that stopping us when we were at the height of our industriousness.”

“If the girls come upstairs . . .”

He bound to his feet. “I’ll lock the door.”

“Oh, good heavens, they’ll *know*.”

He gave the lock a decisive click and turned back to her with an arched brow. “And whose fault is that?”

Daphne drew back. Just a tiny bit. “There is no way I am sending any of my daughters into marriage as hopelessly ignorant as I was.”

“Charmingly ignorant,” he murmured, crossing the room to take her hand.

She allowed him to tug her to her feet. “You didn’t think it was so charming when I

assumed you were impotent.”

He winced. “Many things in life are more charming in retrospect.”

“Simon . . .”

He nuzzled her ear. “Daphne . . .”

His mouth moved along the line of her throat, and she felt herself melting. Twenty-one years of marriage and still . . .

“At least draw the curtains,” she murmured. Not that anyone could possibly see in with the sun shining so brightly, but she would feel more comfortable. They were in the middle of Mayfair, after all, with her entire circle of acquaintances quite possibly strolling outside the window.

He positively dashed over to the window but pulled shut only the sheer scrim. “I like to see you,” he said with a boyish smile.

And then, with remarkable speed and agility, he adjusted the situation so that he was seeing *all* of her, and she was on the bed, moaning softly as he kissed the inside of her knee.

“Oh, Simon,” she sighed. She knew exactly what he was going to do next. He’d move up, kissing and licking his way along her thigh.

And he did it so well.

“What are you thinking about?” he murmured.

“Right now?” she asked, trying to blink her way out of her daze. He had his tongue at the crease between her leg and her abdomen and he thought she could *think*?

“Do you know what I’m thinking?” he asked.

“If it’s not about me, I’m going to be terribly disappointed.”

He chuckled, moved his head so that he could drop a light kiss on her belly button, then scooted up to brush his lips softly against hers. “I was thinking how marvelous it is to know another person so completely.”

She reached out and hugged him. She couldn’t help it. She buried her face in the warm crook of his neck, inhaled the familiar scent of him, and said, “I love you.”

“I adore you.”

Oh, so he was going to make a competition of it, was he? She pulled away, just far enough to say, “I fancy you.”

He quirked a brow. “You *fancy* me?”

“It was the best I could summon on such short notice.” She gave a tiny shrug. “And besides, I do.”

“Very well.” His eyes darkened. “I *worship* you.”

Daphne’s lips parted. Her heart thumped, then flipped, and any facility she might have possessed for synonym retrieval flew right out of her. “I think you’ve won,” she said, her voice so husky she barely recognized it.

He kissed her again, long, hot, and achingly sweet. “Oh, I know I have.”

Her head fell back as he made his way back down to her belly. “You still have to worship me,” she said.

He moved lower. “In that, Your Grace, I am ever your servant.”

And that was the last thing either of them said for quite some time.

Several days later Daphne found herself staring at her calendar once more. It had been forty-six days now since she’d last bled, and she still had not said anything to Simon.

She knew that she should, but it felt somewhat premature. There could be another explanation for the lack of her courses—one had only to recall her last visit with her mother. Violet Bridgerton had been constantly fanning herself, insisting that the air was stifling even though Daphne had found it to be perfectly pleasant.

The one time Daphne had asked someone to light a fire, Violet had countermanded her with such ferocity that Daphne had half expected her to guard the grate with a poker.

“Do not so much as strike a match,” Violet had growled.

To which Daphne had wisely replied, “I do believe I shall fetch a shawl.” She looked at her mother’s housemaid, shivering next to the fireplace. “Er, and perhaps you should, too.”

But she did not feel hot *now*. She felt . . .

She did not know what she felt. Perfectly normal, really. Which was suspicious, as she had never felt the least bit normal while pregnant before.

“Mama!”

Daphne flipped over her calendar and looked up from her writing desk just in time to see her second daughter, Belinda, pause at the entrance of the room.

“Come in,” Daphne said, welcoming the distraction. “Please.”

Belinda sat down in a nearby comfortable chair, her bright blue eyes meeting her mother’s with her usual directness. “You must do something about Caroline.”

“I must?” Daphne queried, her voice lingering ever-so-slightly longer on the “I.”

Belinda ignored the sarcasm. “If she does not stop talking about Frederick Snowe-Mann-Formsby, I shall go mad.”

“Can’t you simply ignore her?”

“His *name* is Frederick Snowe . . . Mann . . . *Formsby*!”

Daphne blinked.

“Snowman, Mama! Snowman!”

“It *is* unfortunate,” Daphne allowed. “But, Lady Belinda Basset, do not forget that you could be likened to a rather droopy hound.”

Belinda’s gaze grew very jaded, and it became instantly clear that someone had indeed likened her to a basset hound.

“Oh,” Daphne said, somewhat surprised that Belinda had never told her about it. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was long ago,” Belinda said with a sniff. “And I assure you, it was not said more than once.”

Daphne pressed her lips together, trying not to smile. It was definitely not good form to encourage fisticuffs, but as she had fought her way to adulthood with seven siblings, four of them brothers, she could not help but utter a quiet “Well-done.”

Belinda gave her a regal nod, then said, “Will you have a talk with Caroline?”

“What is it you wish for me to say?”

“I don’t know. Whatever it is you usually say. It always seems to work.”

There was a compliment in there somewhere, Daphne was fairly certain, but before she could dissect the sentence, her stomach did a nasty flip, followed by the oddest sort of squeeze, and then—

“Excuse me!” she yelped, and she made it to the washroom just in time to reach the chamber pot.

Oh dear God. This wasn't the change. She was pregnant.

"Mama?"

Daphne flicked her hand back at Belinda, trying to dismiss her.

"Mama? Are you all right?"

Daphne retched again.

"I'm getting Father," Belinda announced.

"No!" Daphne fairly howled.

"Was it the fish? Because I thought the fish tasted a bit dodgy."

Daphne nodded, hoping that would be the end of it.

"Oh, wait a moment, you didn't have the fish. I remember it quite distinctly."

Oh, bugger Belinda and her bloody attention to detail.

It was not the most maternal of sentiments, Daphne thought as she once again heaved her innards, but she was not feeling particularly charitable at the moment.

"You had the squab. I had the fish, and so did David, but you and Caroline ate only squab, and I think Father and Amelia had both, and we all had the soup, although—"

"Stop!" Daphne begged. She didn't want to talk about food. Even the mere mention . . .

"I think I had better get Father," Belinda said again.

"No, I'm fine," Daphne gasped, still jerking her hand behind her in a shushing motion. She didn't want Simon to see her like this. He would know instantly what was about.

Or perhaps more to the point, what was about to happen. In seven and a half months, give or take a few weeks.

"Very well," Belinda conceded, "but at least let me fetch your maid. You should be in bed."

Daphne threw up again.

"After you're through," Belinda corrected. "You should be in bed once you're through with . . . ah . . . *that*."

"My maid," Daphne finally agreed. Maria would deduce the truth instantly, but she would not say a word to anyone, servants or family. And perhaps more pressing, Maria would know exactly what to bring as a remedy. It would taste vile and smell worse, but it would settle her stomach.

Belinda dashed off, and Daphne—once she was convinced there could be nothing left in her stomach—staggered to her bed. She held herself extremely still; even the slightest rocking motion made her feel as if she were at sea. "I'm too old for this," she moaned, because she was. Surely, she was. If she remained true to form—and really, why should this confinement be any different from the previous four—she would be gripped by nausea for at least two more months. The lack of food would keep her slender, but that would last only until mid-summer, when she would double in size, practically overnight. Her fingers would swell to the point that she could not wear her rings, she would not fit into any of her shoes, and even a single flight of stairs would leave her gasping for breath.

She would be an elephant. A two-legged, chestnut-haired elephant.

"Your Grace!"

Daphne could not lift her head, so she lifted her hand instead, a pathetic silent greeting to Maria, who was by now standing by the bed, staring down at her with an

expression of horror . . .

. . . that was quickly sliding into one of suspicion.

“Your Grace,” Maria said again, this time with unmistakable inflection. She smiled.

“I know,” Daphne said. “I know.”

“Does the duke know?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, you won’t be able to hide it for long.”

“He leaves this afternoon for a few nights at Clyvedon,” Daphne said. “I will tell him when he returns.”

“You should tell him now,” Maria said. Twenty years of employment did give a maid some license to speak freely.

Daphne carefully edged herself up into a reclining position, stopping once to calm a wave of nausea. “It might not take,” she said. “At my age, they very often don’t.”

“Oh, I think it’s taken,” Maria said. “Have you looked in the mirror yet?”

Daphne shook her head.

“You’re green.”

“It might not—”

“You’re not going to throw the baby up.”

“Maria!”

Maria crossed her arms and speared Daphne with a stare. “You know the truth, Your Grace. You just don’t want to admit it.”

Daphne opened her mouth to speak, but she had nothing to say. She knew Maria was right.

“If the baby hadn’t taken,” Maria said, a bit more gently, “you wouldn’t be feeling so sickly. My mum had eight babies after me, and four losses early on. She never was sick, not even once, with the ones that didn’t take.”

Daphne sighed and then nodded, conceding the point. “I’m still going to wait, though,” she said. “Just a bit longer.” She wasn’t sure why she wanted to keep this to herself for a few more days, but she did. And as she was the one whose body was currently trying to turn itself inside out, she rather thought it was her decision to make.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Maria said. “We received word from your brother. He’s coming to town next week.”

“Colin?” Daphne asked.

Maria nodded. “With his family.”

“They must stay with us,” Daphne said. Colin and Penelope did not own a home in town, and to economize they tended to stay with either Daphne or their oldest brother, Anthony, who had inherited the title and all that went with it. “Please ask Belinda to pen a letter on my behalf, insisting that they come to Hastings House.”

Maria gave a nod and departed.

Daphne moaned and went to sleep.

By the time Colin and Penelope arrived, with their four darling children in tow, Daphne was throwing up several times a day. Simon still didn’t know about her condition; he’d been delayed in the country—something about a flooded field—and now he wasn’t due back until the end of the week.

But Daphne wasn’t going to let a queasy belly get in the way of greeting her favorite

brother. “Colin!” she exclaimed, her smile growing positively giddy at the familiar sight of his sparkling green eyes. “It has been much too long.”

“I fully agree,” he said, giving her a quick hug while Penelope attempted to shoo their children into the house.

“No, you may not chase that pigeon!” she said sternly. “So sorry, Daphne, but—” She dashed back out onto the front steps, neatly nabbing seven-year-old Thomas by the collar.

“Be grateful your urchins are grown,” Colin said with a chuckle as he took a step back. “We can’t keep— Good God, Daff, what’s wrong with you?”

Trust a brother to dispense with tact.

“You look awful,” he said, as if he hadn’t made that clear with his first statement.

“Just a bit under the weather,” she mumbled. “I think it was the fish.”

“Uncle Colin!”

Colin’s attention was thankfully distracted by Belinda and Caroline, who were racing down the stairs with a decided lack of ladylike grace.

“You!” he said with a grin, pulling one into a hug. “And you!” He looked up. “Where’s the other you?”

“Amelia’s off shopping,” Belinda said, before turning her attention to her little cousins. Agatha had just turned nine, Thomas was seven, and Jane was six. Little Georgie would be three the following month.

“You’re getting so big!” Belinda said to Jane, beaming down at her.

“I grew two inches in the last month!” she announced.

“In the last year,” Penelope corrected gently. She couldn’t quite reach Daphne for a hug, so she leaned over and squeezed her hand. “I know your girls were quite grown up last time I saw them, but I swear, I am still surprised by it every time.”

“So am I,” Daphne admitted. She still woke some mornings half expecting her girls to be in pinafores. The fact that they were ladies, fully grown . . .

It was baffling.

“Well, you know what they say about motherhood,” Penelope said.

“ ‘They’?” Daphne murmured.

Penelope paused just long enough to shoot her a wry grin. “The years fly by, and the days are endless.”

“That’s impossible,” Thomas announced.

Agatha let out an aggrieved sigh. “He’s so literal.”

Daphne reached out to ruffle Agatha’s light brown hair. “Are you really only nine?” She adored Agatha, always had. There was something about that little girl, so serious and determined, that had always touched her heart.

Agatha, being Agatha, immediately recognized the question as rhetorical and popped up to her tiptoes to give her aunt a kiss.

Daphne returned the gesture with a peck on the cheek, then turned to the young family’s nurse, standing near the doorway holding little Georgie. “And how are you, you darling thing?” she cooed, reaching out to take the boy into her arms. He was plump and blond with pink cheeks and a heavenly baby smell despite the fact that he wasn’t really a baby any longer. “You look scrumptious,” she said, pretending to take a nibble of his neck. She tested the weight of him, rocking slightly back and forth in that instinctive motherly way.

“You don’t need to be rocked anymore, do you?” she murmured, kissing him again. His skin was so soft, and it took her back to her days as a young mother. She’d had nurses and nannies, of course, but she couldn’t even count the number of times she’d crept into the children’s rooms to sneak a kiss on the cheek and watch them sleep.

Ah well. She was sentimental. This was nothing new.

“How old are you now, Georgie?” she asked, thinking that maybe she *could* do this again. Not that she had much choice, but still, she felt reassured, standing here with this little boy in her arms.

Agatha tugged on her sleeve and whispered, “He doesn’t talk.”

Daphne blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Agatha glanced over at her parents, as if she wasn’t sure she should be saying anything. They were busy chatting with Belinda and Caroline and took no notice. “He doesn’t talk,” she said again. “Not a word.”

Daphne pulled back slightly so that she could look at Georgie’s face again. He smiled at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners exactly the same way Colin’s did.

Daphne looked back at Agatha. “Does he understand what people say?”

Agatha nodded. “Every word. I’m sure of it.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I think my mother and father are concerned.”

A child nearing his third birthday without a word? Daphne was *sure* they were concerned. Suddenly the reason for Colin and Penelope’s unexpected trip to town became clear. They were looking for guidance. Simon had been just the same way as child. He hadn’t spoken a word until he was four. And then he’d suffered a debilitating stutter for years. Even now, when he was particularly upset about something, it would creep back over him, and she’d hear it in his voice. A strange pause, a repeated sound, a halting catch. He was still self-conscious about it, although not nearly so much as he had been when they’d first met.

But she could see it in his eyes. A flash of pain. Or maybe anger. At himself, at his own weakness. Daphne supposed that there were some things people never got past, not completely.

Reluctantly, Daphne handed Georgie back to his nurse and urged Agatha toward the stairs. “Come along, darling,” she said. “The nursery is waiting. We took out all of the girls’ old toys.”

She watched with pride as Belinda took Agatha by the hand. “You may play with my favorite doll,” Belinda said with great gravity.

Agatha looked up at her cousin with an expression that could only be described as reverence and then followed her up the stairs.

Daphne waited until all the children were gone and then turned back to her brother and his wife. “Tea?” she asked. “Or do you wish to change out of your traveling clothes?”

“Tea,” Penelope said with the sigh of an exhausted mother. “Please.”

Colin nodded his agreement, and together they went into the drawing room. Once they were seated Daphne decided there was no point in being anything but direct. This was her brother, after all, and he knew he could talk to her about anything.

“You’re worried about Georgie,” she said. It was a statement, not a question.

“He hasn’t said a word,” Penelope said quietly. Her voice was even, but her throat caught in an uncomfortable swallow.

“He understands us,” Colin said. “I’m sure of it. Just the other day I asked him to pick up his toys, and he did so. Immediately.”

“Simon was the same way,” Daphne said. She looked from Colin to Penelope and back. “I assume that is why you came? To speak with Simon?”

“We hoped he might offer some insight,” Penelope said.

Daphne nodded slowly. “I’m sure he will. He was detained in the country, I’m afraid, but he is expected back before the week’s end.”

“There is no rush,” Colin said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Daphne saw Penelope’s shoulders slump. It was a tiny motion but one any mother would recognize. Penelope knew there was no rush. They had waited nearly three years for Georgie to talk; a few more days wouldn’t make a difference. And yet she wanted so desperately to do *something*. To take an action, to make her child whole.

To have come this far only to find that Simon was gone . . . It had to be discouraging.

“I think it is a very good sign that he understands you,” Daphne said. “I would be much more concerned if he did not.”

“Everything else about him is completely normal,” Penelope said passionately. “He runs, he jumps, he eats. He even reads, I think.”

Colin turned to her in surprise. “He does?”

“I believe so,” Penelope said. “I saw him with William’s primer last week.”

“He was probably just looking at the illustrations,” Colin said gently.

“That’s what I thought, but then I watched his eyes! They were moving back and forth, following the words.”

They both turned to Daphne, as if she might have all the answers.

“I suppose he might be reading,” Daphne said, feeling rather inadequate. She wanted to have all the answers. She wanted to say something to them other than *I suppose* or *Perhaps*. “He’s rather young, but there’s no reason he couldn’t be reading.”

“He’s very bright,” Penelope said.

Colin gave a look that was mostly indulgent. “Darling . . .”

“He is! And William read when he was four. Agatha, too.”

“Actually,” Colin admitted thoughtfully, “Agatha did start to read at three. Nothing terribly involved, but I know she was reading short words. I remember it quite well.”

“Georgie is reading,” Penelope said firmly. “I am sure of it.”

“Well, then, that means we have even less to be concerned about,” Daphne said with determined good cheer. “Any child who is reading before his third birthday will have no trouble speaking when he is ready to do so.”

She had no idea if this was actually the case. But she rather thought it ought to be. And it *seemed* reasonable. And if Georgie turned out to have a stutter, just like Simon, his family would still love him and adore him and give him all the support he needed to grow into the wonderful person she knew he would be.

He’d have everything Simon hadn’t had as a child.

“It will be all right,” Daphne said, leaning forward to take Penelope’s hand in hers. “You’ll see.”

Penelope’s lips pressed together, and Daphne saw her throat tighten. She turned away, wanting to give her sister-in-law a moment to compose herself. Colin was munching on his third biscuit and reaching for a cup of tea, so Daphne decided to

direct her next question to him.

“Is everything well with the rest of the children?” she asked.

He swallowed his tea. “Quite well. And yours?”

“David has got into a bit of mischief at school, but he seems to be settling down.”

He picked up another biscuit. “And the girls aren’t giving you fits?”

Daphne blinked with surprise. “No, of course not. Why do you ask?”

“You look terrible,” he said.

“Colin!” Penelope interjected.

He shrugged. “She does. I asked about it when we first arrived.”

“But still,” his wife admonished, “you shouldn’t—”

“If I can’t say something to her, who can?” he said plainly. “Or more to the point, who *will*?”

Penelope dropped her voice to an urgent whisper. “It’s not the sort of thing one talks about.”

He stared at her for a moment. Then he looked at Daphne. Then he turned back to his wife. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said.

Penelope’s lips parted, and her cheeks went a bit pink. She looked over at Daphne, as if to say, *Well?*

Daphne just sighed. Was her condition *that* obvious?

Penelope gave Colin an impatient look. “She’s—” She turned back to Daphne. “You are, aren’t you?”

Daphne gave a tiny nod of confirmation.

Penelope looked at her husband with a certain degree of smugness. “She’s pregnant.”

Colin froze for about one half a second before continuing on in his usual unflappable manner. “No, she’s not.”

“She is,” Penelope replied.

Daphne decided not to speak. She was feeling queasy, anyway.

“Her youngest is seventeen,” Colin pointed out. He glanced over at Daphne. “He is, isn’t he?”

“Sixteen,” Daphne murmured.

“Sixteen,” he repeated, directing this at Penelope. “Still.”

“Still?”

“Still.”

Daphne yawned. She couldn’t help it. She was just *exhausted* these days.

“Colin,” Penelope said, in that patient yet vaguely condescending tone that Daphne *loved* to hear directed at her brother, “David’s age hardly has anything to do with—”

“I realize that,” he cut in, giving her a vaguely annoyed look. “But don’t you think, if she were going to . . .” He waved a hand in Daphne’s general direction, leaving her to wonder if he could not bring himself to utter the word *pregnant* in relation to his own sister.

He cleared his throat. “Well, there wouldn’t have been a sixteen-year gap.”

Daphne closed her eyes for a moment, then let her head settle against the back of the sofa. She really *should* feel embarrassed. This was her brother. And even if he was using rather vague terms, he was talking about the most intimate aspects of her marriage.

She let out a tired little noise, something between a sigh and a hum. She was too

sleepy to be embarrassed. And maybe too old, too. Women ought to be able to dispense with maidenly fits of modesty when they passed forty.

Besides, Colin and Penelope were bickering, and that was a good thing. It took their minds off Georgie.

Daphne found it rather entertaining, really. It was lovely to watch any of her brothers stuck in a stalemate with his wife.

Forty-one definitely wasn't too old to feel just a little bit of pleasure at the discomfort of one's brothers. Although—she yawned again—it would be more entertaining if she were a bit more alert to enjoy it. Still . . .

“Did she fall asleep?”

Colin stared at his sister in disbelief.

“I think she did,” Penelope replied.

He stretched toward her, craning his neck for a better view. “There are so many things I could do to her right now,” he mused. “Frogs, locusts, rivers turning to blood.”

“Colin!”

“It's so tempting.”

“It's also proof,” Penelope said with a hint of a smirk.

“Proof?”

“She's pregnant! Just like I said.” When he did not agree with her quickly enough, she added, “Have you ever known her to fall asleep in the middle of a conversation?”

“Not since—” He cut himself off.

Penelope's smirk grew significantly less subtle. “Exactly.”

“I hate when you're right,” he grumbled.

“I know. Pity for you I so often am.”

He glanced back over at Daphne, who was starting to snore. “I suppose we should stay with her,” he said, somewhat reluctantly.

“I'll ring for her maid,” Penelope said.

“Do you think Simon knows?”

Penelope glanced over her shoulder once she reached the bellpull. “I have no idea.”

Colin just shook his head. “Poor bloke is in for the surprise of his life.”

When Simon finally returned to London, fully one week delayed, he was exhausted. He had always been a more involved landowner than most of his peers—even as he found himself approaching the age of fifty. And so when several of his fields flooded, including one that provided the sole income for a tenant family, he rolled up his sleeves and got to work alongside his men.

Figuratively, of course. All sleeves had most definitely been down. It had been bloody cold in Sussex. Worse when one was wet. Which of course they all had been, what with the flood and all.

So he was tired, and he was still cold—he wasn't sure his fingers would ever regain their previous temperature—and he missed his family. He would have asked them to join him in the country, but the girls were preparing for the season, and Daphne had looked a bit peaked when he left.

He hoped she wasn't coming down with a cold. When she got sick, the entire household felt it.

She thought she was a stoic. He had once tried to point out that a true stoic wouldn't go about the house repeatedly saying, "No, no, I'm fine," as she sagged into a chair.

Actually, he had tried to point this out twice. The first time he said something she had not responded. At the time, he'd thought she hadn't heard him. In retrospect, however, it was far more likely that she had *chosen* not to hear him, because the second time he said something about the true nature of a stoic, her response had been such that . . .

Well, let it be said that when it came to his wife and the common cold, his lips would never again form words other than "You poor, poor dear" and "May I fetch you some tea?"

There were some things a man learned after two decades of marriage.

When he stepped into the front hall, the butler was waiting, his face in its usual mode—that is to say, completely devoid of expression.

"Thank you, Jeffries," Simon murmured, handing him his hat.

"Your brother-in-law is here," Jeffries told him.

Simon paused. "Which one?" He had seven.

"Mr. Colin Bridgerton, Your Grace. With his family."

Simon cocked his head. "Really?" He didn't hear chaos and commotion.

"They are out, Your Grace."

"And the duchess?"

"She is resting."

Simon could not suppress a groan. "She's not ill, is she?"

Jeffries, in a most un-Jeffries-like manner, blushed. "I could not say, Your Grace."

Simon regarded Jeffries with a curious eye. "Is she ill, or isn't she?"

Jeffries swallowed, cleared his throat, and then said, "I believe she is tired, Your Grace."

"Tired," Simon repeated, mostly to himself since it was clear that Jeffries would expire of inexplicable embarrassment if he pursued the conversation further. Shaking his head, he headed upstairs, adding, "Of course, she's tired. Colin's got four children under the age of ten, and she probably thinks she's got to mother the lot while they're here."

Maybe he'd have a lie-down next to her. He was exhausted, too, and he always slept better when she was near.

The door to their room was shut when he got to it, and he almost knocked—it was a habit to do so at a closed door, even if it did lead to his own bedchamber—but at the last moment he instead gripped the doorknob and gave a soft push. She could be sleeping. If she truly was tired, he ought to let her rest.

Stepping lightly, he entered the room. The curtains were partway drawn, and he could see Daphne lying in bed, still as a bone. He tiptoed closer. She *did* look pale, although it was hard to tell in the dim light.

He yawned and sat on the opposite side of the bed, leaning forward to pull off his boots. He loosened his cravat and then slid it off entirely, scooting himself toward her. He wasn't going to wake her, just snuggle up for a bit of warmth.

He'd missed her.

Settling in with a contented sigh, he put his arm around her, resting its weight just below her rib cage, and—

“Grughargh!”

Daphne shot up like a bullet and practically hurled herself from the bed.

“Daphne?” Simon sat up, too, just in time to see her race for the chamber pot.

The chamber pot????

“Oh dear,” he said, wincing as she retched. “Fish?”

“Don’t say that word,” she gasped.

Must have been fish. They really needed to find a new fishmonger here in town.

He crawled out of bed to find a towel. “Can I get you anything?”

She didn’t answer. He hadn’t really expected her to. Still, he held out the towel, trying not to flinch when she threw up for what had to be the fourth time.

“You poor, poor dear,” he murmured. “I’m so sorry this happened to you. You haven’t been like this since—”

Since . . .

Oh, dear God.

“*Daphne?*” His voice shook. Hell, his whole body shook.

She nodded.

“But . . . how . . . ?”

“The usual way, I imagine,” she said, gratefully taking the towel.

“But it’s been— It’s been—” He tried to think. He couldn’t think. His brain had completely ceased working.

“I think I’m done,” she said. She sounded exhausted. “Could you get me a bit of water?”

“Are you certain?” If he recalled correctly, the water would pop right back up and into the chamber pot.

“It’s over there,” she said, motioning weakly to a pitcher on a table. “I’m not going to swallow it.”

He poured her a glass and waited while she swished out her mouth.

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat several times, “I . . . ah . . .” He coughed again. He could not get a word out to save his life. And he couldn’t blame his stutter this time.

“Everyone knows,” Daphne said, placing her hand on his arm for support as she moved back to bed.

“Everyone?” he echoed.

“I hadn’t planned to say anything until you returned, but they guessed.”

He nodded slowly, still trying to absorb it all. A baby. At his age. At *her* age.

It was . . .

It was . . .

It was *amazing*.

Strange how it came over him so suddenly. But now, after the initial shock wore off, all he could feel was pure joy.

“This is wonderful news!” he exclaimed. He reached out to hug her, then thought better of it when he saw her pasty complexion. “You never cease to delight me,” he said, instead giving her an awkward pat on the shoulder.

She winced and closed her eyes. “Don’t rock the bed,” she moaned. “You’re making me seasick.”

“You don’t get seasick,” he reminded her.