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BRIDGERTON



AN OFFER FROM
A GENTLEMAN

JULIA QUINN



PIATKUS

*Prologue*

Everyone knew that Sophie Beckett was a bastard.

The servants all knew it. But they loved little Sophie, had loved her since she'd arrived at Penwood Park at the age of three, a small bundle wrapped in a too-big coat, left on the doorstep on a rainy July night. And because they loved her, they pretended that she was exactly what the sixth Earl of Penwood said she was—the orphaned daughter of an old friend. Never mind that Sophie's moss green eyes and dark blond hair matched the earl's precisely. Never mind that the shape of her face looked remarkably like that of the earl's recently deceased mother, or that her smile was an exact replica of the earl's sister's. No one wanted to hurt Sophie's feelings—or risk their livelihoods—by pointing that out.

The earl, one Richard Gunningworth, never discussed Sophie or her origins, but he must have known she was his bastard. No one knew what had been in the letter the housekeeper had fished from Sophie's pocket when she'd been discovered that rainy midnight; the earl had burned the missive mere seconds after reading it. He'd watched the paper shrivel and curl in the flames, then ordered a room made up for Sophie near the nursery. She'd remained there ever since. He called her Sophia, and she called him "my lord," and they saw each other a few times a year, whenever the earl returned home from London, which wasn't very often.

But perhaps most importantly, Sophie knew she was a bastard. She wasn't entirely certain how she knew it, just that she did, and probably had her entire life. She had few memories of her life before her arrival at Penwood Park, but she could remember a long coach journey across England, and she could remember her grandmother, coughing and wheezing and looking terribly thin, telling her she was going to live with her father. And most of all, she could remember standing on the doorstep in the rain, knowing that her grandmother was hiding in the bushes, waiting to see if Sophie was taken inside.

The earl had touched his fingers to the little girl's chin, tipped her face up to the light, and in that moment they both knew the truth.

Everyone knew Sophie was a bastard, and no one talked about it, and they were all quite happy with this arrangement.

Until the earl decided to marry.

Sophie had been quite pleased when she'd heard the news. The housekeeper had said that the butler had said that the earl's secretary had said that the earl planned to spend more time at Penwood Park now that he would be a family man. And while Sophie didn't exactly miss the earl when he was gone—it was hard to miss someone who didn't pay her much attention even when he was there—she rather thought she *might* miss him if she got to know him better, and if she got to know him better, maybe he wouldn't go away so often. Plus, the upstairs maid had said that the housekeeper had said that the neighbors' butler had said that the earl's intended wife already had two daughters, and they were near in age to Sophie.

After seven years alone in the nursery, Sophie was delighted. Unlike the other children in the district, she was never invited to local parties and events. No one actually came out and called her a bastard—to do so was tantamount to calling the earl, who had made one declaration that So-

phie was his ward and then never revisited the subject, a liar. But at the same time, the earl never made any great attempt to force Sophie's acceptance. And so at the age of ten, Sophie's best friends were maids and footmen, and her parents might as well have been the housekeeper and butler.

But now she was getting sisters for real.

Oh, she knew she could not call them her sisters. She knew that she would be introduced as Sophia Maria Beckett, the earl's ward, but they would *feel* like sisters. And that was what really mattered.

And so, one February afternoon, Sophie found herself waiting in the great hall along with the assembled servants, watching out the window for the earl's carriage to pull up the drive, carrying in it the new countess and her two daughters. And, of course, the earl.

"Do you think she'll like me?" Sophie whispered to Mrs. Gibbons, the housekeeper. "The earl's wife, I mean."

"Of course she'll like you, dearling," Mrs. Gibbons whispered back. But her eyes hadn't been as certain as her tone. The new countess might not take kindly to the presence of her husband's by-blow.

"And I'll take lessons with her daughters?"

"No point in having you take your lessons separately."

Sophie nodded thoughtfully, then started to squirm when she saw the carriage rolling up the drive. "They're here!" she whispered.

Mrs. Gibbons reached out to pat her on the head, but Sophie had already dashed off to the window, practically pressing her face up to the glass.

The earl stepped down first, then reached in and helped down two young girls. They were dressed in matching black coats. One wore a pink ribbon in her hair; the other yellow. Then, as the two girls stepped aside, the earl reached up to help one last person from the carriage.

Sophie's breath caught in her throat as she waited for the new countess to emerge. Her little fingers crossed and a sin-

gle, "Please," whispered over her lips.

Please let her love me.

Maybe if the countess loved her, then the earl would love her as well, and maybe, even if he didn't actually call her daughter, he'd treat her as one, and they'd be a family truly.

As Sophie watched through the window, the new countess stepped down from the carriage, her every movement so graceful and pure that Sophie was reminded of the delicate lark that occasionally came to splash in the birdbath in the garden. Even the countess's hat was adorned by a long feather, its turquoise plume glittering in the hard winter sun.

"She's beautiful," Sophie whispered. She darted a quick look back at Mrs. Gibbons to gauge her reaction, but the housekeeper was standing at strict attention, eyes straight ahead, waiting for the earl to bring his new family inside for introductions.

Sophie gulped, not exactly certain where she was meant to stand. Everyone else seemed to have a designated place. The servants were lined up according to rank, from the butler right down to the lowliest scullery maid. Even the dogs were sitting dutifully in the corner, their leads held tight by the Keeper of the Hounds.

But Sophie was rootless. If she were truly the daughter of the house, she'd be standing with her governess, awaiting the new countess. If she were truly the earl's ward, she'd be in much the same place. But Miss Timmons had caught a head cold and refused to leave the nursery and come downstairs. None of the servants believed for a second that the governess was truly ill. She'd been fine the night before, but no one blamed her for the deception. Sophie was, after all, the earl's bastard, and no one wanted to be the one to offer potential insult to the new countess by introducing her to her husband's by-blow.

And the countess would have to be blind, stupid, or both not to realize in an instant that Sophie was something more

than the earl's ward.

Suddenly overcome with shyness, Sophie shrank into a corner as two footmen threw open the front doors with a flourish. The two girls entered first, then stepped to the side as the earl led the countess in. The earl introduced the countess and her daughters to the butler, and the butler introduced them to the servants.

And Sophie waited.

The butler presented the footmen, the chef, the housekeeper, the grooms.

And Sophie waited.

He presented the kitchen maids, the upstairs maids, the scullery maids.

And Sophie waited.

And then finally the butler—Rumsey was his name—presented the lowliest of the lowest of maids, a scullery girl named Dulcie who had been hired a mere week earlier. The earl nodded and murmured his thanks, and Sophie was still waiting, completely unsure of what to do.

So she cleared her throat and stepped forward, a nervous smile on her face. She didn't spend much time with the earl, but she was trotted out before him whenever he visited Penwood Park, and he always gave her a few minutes of his time, asking about her lessons before shooing her back up to the nursery.

Surely he'd still want to know how her studies were progressing, even now that he'd married. Surely he'd want to know that she'd mastered the science of multiplying fractions, and that Miss Timmons had recently declared her French accent, "perfection."

But he was busy saying something to the countess's daughters, and he didn't hear her. Sophie cleared her throat again, this time more loudly, and said, "My lord?" in a voice that came out a bit more squeaky than she'd intended.

The earl turned around. "Ah, Sophie," he murmured, "I

didn't realize you were in the hall."

Sophie beamed. He hadn't been ignoring her, after all.

"And who might this be?" the countess asked, stepping forward to get a better look.

"My ward," the earl replied. "Miss Sophia Beckett."

The countess speared Sophie with an assessing look, then her eyes narrowed.

And narrowed.

And narrowed some more.

"I see," she said.

And everyone in the room knew instantly that she *did* see.

"Rosamund," the countess said, turning to her two girls, "Posy, come with me."

The girls moved immediately to their mother's side. Sophie hazarded a smile in their direction. The smaller one smiled back, but the older one, whose hair was the color of spun gold, took her cue from her mother, pointed her nose in the air, and looked firmly away.

Sophie gulped and smiled again at the friendly girl, but this time the little girl chewed on her lower lip in indecision, then cast her eyes toward the floor.

The countess turned her back on Sophie and said to the earl, "I assume you have had rooms prepared for Rosamund and Posy."

He nodded. "Near the nursery. Right next to Sophie."

There was a long silence, and then the countess must have decided that certain battles should not be conducted before the servants, because all she said was, "I would like to go upstairs now."

And she left, taking the earl and her daughters along with her.

Sophie watched the new family walk up the stairs, and then, as they disappeared onto the landing, she turned to Mrs. Gibbons and asked, "Do you think I should go up to help? I could show the girls the nursery?"

Mrs. Gibbons shook her head. "They looked tired," she

lied. "I'm sure they'll be needing a nap."

Sophie frowned. She'd been told that Rosamund was eleven and Posy was ten. Surely that was a bit old for taking naps.

Mrs. Gibbons patted her on the back. "Why don't you come with me? I could use a bit of company, and Cook told me that she just made a fresh batch of shortbread. I think it's still warm."

Sophie nodded and followed her out of the hall. She'd have plenty of time that evening to get to know the two girls. She'd show them the nursery, and then they'd become friends, and before long they'd be as sisters.

Sophie smiled. It would be glorious to have sisters.

As it happened, Sophie did not encounter Rosamund and Posy—or the earl and countess, for that matter—until the next day. When Sophie entered the nursery to take her supper, she noticed that the table had been set for two, not four, and Miss Timmons (who had miraculously recovered from her ailment) said that the new countess had told her that Rosamund and Posy were too tired from their travels to eat that evening.

But the girls had to have their lessons, and so the next morning they arrived in the nursery, trailing the countess by one step each. Sophie had been working at her lessons for an hour already, and she looked up from her arithmetic with great interest. She didn't smile at the girls this time. Somehow it seemed best not to.

"Miss Timmons," the countess said.

Miss Timmons bobbed a curtsy, murmuring, "My lady."

"The earl tells me you will teach my daughters."

"I will do my best, my lady."

The countess motioned to the older girl, the one with golden hair and cornflower eyes. She looked, Sophie thought, as pretty as the porcelain doll the earl had sent up from London for her seventh birthday.

"This," the countess said, "is Rosamund. She is eleven. And this"—she then motioned to the other girl, who had not taken her eyes off of her shoes—"is Posy. She is ten."

Sophie looked at Posy with great interest. Unlike her mother and sister, her hair and eyes were quite dark, and her cheeks were a bit pudgy.

"Sophie is also ten," Miss Timmons replied.

The countess's lips thinned. "I would like you to show the girls around the house and garden."

Miss Timmons nodded. "Very well. Sophie, put your slate down. We can return to arithmetic—"

"Just *my* girls," the countess interrupted, her voice somehow hot and cold at the same time. "I will speak with Sophie alone."

Sophie gulped and tried to bring her eyes to the countess's, but she only made it as far as her chin. As Miss Timmons ushered Rosamund and Posy out of the room she stood up, awaiting further direction from her father's new wife.

"I know who you are," the countess said the moment the door clicked shut.

"M-my lady?"

"You're his bastard, and don't try to deny it."

Sophie said nothing. It was the truth, of course, but no one had ever said it aloud. At least not to her face.

The countess grabbed her chin and squeezed and pulled until Sophie was forced to look her in the eye. "You listen to me," she said in a menacing voice. "You might live here at Penwood Park, and you might share lessons with my daughters, but you are nothing but a bastard, and that is all you will ever be. Don't you ever, *ever* make the mistake of thinking you are as good as the rest of us."

Sophie let out a little moan. The countess's fingernails were biting into the underside of her chin.

"My husband," the countess continued, "feels some sort of misguided duty to you. It's admirable of him to see to his

mistakes, but it is an insult to me to have you in my home—fed, clothed, and educated as if you were his real daughter."

But she *was* his real daughter. And it had been her home much longer than the countess's.

Abruptly, the countess let go of her chin. "I don't want to see you," she hissed. "You are never to speak to me, and you shall endeavor never to be in my company. Furthermore, you are not to speak to Rosamund and Posy except during lessons. They are the daughters of the house now, and should not have to associate with the likes of *you*. Do you have any questions?"

Sophie shook her head.

"Good."

And with that, she swept out of the room, leaving Sophie with wobbly legs and a quivering lip.

And an awful lot of tears.

In time, Sophie learned a bit more about her precarious position in the house. The servants always knew everything, and it all reached Sophie's ears eventually.

The countess, whose given name was Araminta, had insisted that very first day that Sophie be removed from the house. The earl had refused. Araminta didn't have to love Sophie, he'd said coolly. She didn't even have to like her. But she had to put up with her. He had owned up to his responsibility to the girl for seven years, and he wasn't going to stop now.

Rosamund and Posy took their cues from Araminta and treated Sophie with hostility and disdain, although Posy's heart clearly wasn't into torture and cruelty in the way Rosamund's was. Rosamund liked nothing better than to pinch and twist the skin on the back of Sophie's hand when Miss Timmons wasn't looking. Sophie never said anything; she rather doubted that Miss Timmons would have the courage to reprimand Rosamund (who would surely run to

Araminta with a false tale), and if anyone noticed that Sophie's hands were perpetually black-and-blue, no one ever said so.

Posy showed her the occasional kindness, although more often than not she just sighed, and said, "My mummy says I'm not to be nice to you."

As for the earl, he never intervened.

Sophie's life continued in this vein for four years, until the earl surprised everyone by clutching his hand to his chest while taking tea in the rose garden, letting out one ragged gasp, and falling facefirst to the stone cobbles.

He never regained consciousness.

Everyone was quite shocked. The earl was only forty years old. Who could have known that his heart would give out at such a young age? No one was more stunned than Araminta, who had been trying quite desperately since her wedding night to conceive the all-important heir.

"I might be with child!" she hastened to tell the earl's solicitors. "You can't give the title over to some distant cousin. I could very well be with child."

But she wasn't with child, and when the earl's will was read one month later (the solicitors had wanted to be sure to give the countess enough time to know for sure if she was pregnant) Araminta was forced to sit next to the new earl, a rather dissolute young man who was more often drunk than not.

Most of the earl's wishes were standard fare. He left bequests to loyal servants. He settled funds on Rosamund, Posy, and even Sophie, ensuring that all three girls would have respectable dowries.

And then the solicitor reached Araminta's name.

To my wife, Araminta Gunningworth, Countess of Penwood, I leave a yearly income of two thousand pounds—

"That's all?" Araminta cried out.

—unless she agrees to shelter and care for my ward, Miss Sophia Maria Beckett, until the latter reaches the age of twenty, in which case her yearly income shall be trebled to six thousand pounds.

"I don't want her," Araminta whispered.

"You don't have to take her," the solicitor reminded her. "You can—"

"Live on a measly two thousand a year?" she snapped. "I don't think so."

The solicitor, who lived on considerably less than two thousand a year, said nothing.

The new earl, who'd been drinking steadily throughout the meeting, just shrugged.

Araminta stood.

"What is your decision?" the solicitor asked.

"I'll take her," she said in a low voice.

"Shall I find the girl and tell her?"

Araminta shook her head. "I'll tell her myself."


But when Araminta found Sophie, she left out a few important facts . . .

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Part One


Chapter 1

This year's most sought-after invitation must surely be that of the Bridgerton masquerade ball, to be held Monday next. Indeed, one cannot take two steps without being forced to listen to some society mama speculating on who will attend, and perhaps more importantly, who will wear what.

Neither of the aforementioned topics, however, are nearly as interesting as that of the two unmarried Bridgerton brothers, Benedict and Colin. (Before anyone points out that there is a third unmarried Bridgerton brother, let This Author assure you that she is fully aware of the existence of Gregory Bridgerton. He is, however, fourteen years of age, and therefore not pertinent to this particular column, which concerns, as This Author's columns often do, that most sacred of sports: husband-hunting.)

Although the Misters Bridgerton are just that—merely Misters—they are still considered two of the prime catches of the season. It is a well-known fact that both are possessed of respectable fortunes, and it does not require perfect sight to know that they also possess, as do all eight of the Bridgerton offspring, the Bridgerton good looks.

Will some fortunate young lady use the mystery of a masquerade night to snare one of the eligible bachelors?

This Author isn't even going to attempt to speculate.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 31 MAY 1815

“Sophie! Sophieeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

As screeches went, it was enough to shatter glass. Or at least an eardrum.

“Coming, Rosamund! I’m coming!” Sophie hitched up the hem of her coarse woolen skirts and hurried up the stairs, slipping on the fourth step and only just barely managing to grab the bannister before landing on her bottom. She should have remembered that the stairs would be slick; she’d helped the downstairs maid wax them just that morning.

Skidding to a halt in the doorway to Rosamund’s bedroom and still catching her breath, Sophie said, “Yes?”

“My tea is cold.”

What Sophie wanted to say was, “It was warm when I brought it an hour ago, you lazy fiend.”

What she did say was, “I’ll get you another pot.”

Rosamund sniffed. “See that you do.”

Sophie stretched her lips into what the nearly blind might call a smile and picked up the tea service. “Shall I leave the biscuits?” she asked.

Rosamund gave her pretty head a shake. “I want fresh ones.”

Shoulders slightly stooped from the weight of the overloaded tea service, Sophie exited the room, careful not to start grumbling until she’d safely reached the hall. Rosamund was forever ordering tea, then not bothering to drink it until an hour passed. By then, of course, it was cold, so she had to order a fresh pot.

Which meant Sophie was forever running up and down the stairs, up and down, up and down. Sometimes it seemed that was all she did with her life.

Up and down, up and down.

And of course the mending, the pressing, the hairdressing, the shoe polishing, the darning, the bedmaking . . .

“Sophie!”

Sophie turned around to see Posy heading toward her.

“Sophie, I’ve been meaning to ask you, do you think this color is becoming on me?”

Sophie assessed Posy’s mermaid costume. The cut wasn’t quite right for Posy, who had never lost all of her baby fat, but the color did indeed bring out the best in her complexion. “It is a lovely shade of green,” Sophie replied quite honestly. “It makes your cheeks very rosy.”

“Oh, good. I’m so glad you like it. You do have such a knack for picking out my clothing.” Posy smiled as she reached out and plucked a sugared biscuit from the tray. “Mother has been an absolute bear all week about the masquerade ball, and I know I shall never hear the end of it if I do not look my best. Or”—Posy’s face twisted into a grimace—“if she *thinks* I do not look my best. She is determined that one of us snare one of the remaining Bridgerton brothers, you know.”

“I know.”

“And to make matters worse, that Whistledown woman has been writing about them again. It only”—Posy finished chewing and paused while she swallowed—“whets her appetite.”

“Was the column very good this morning?” Sophie asked, shifting the tray to rest on her hip. “I haven’t had a chance to read it yet.”

“Oh, the usual stuff,” Posy said with a wave of her hand. “Really, it can be quite humdrum, you know.”

Sophie tried to smile and failed. She’d like nothing more than to live a day of Posy’s humdrum life. Well, perhaps she wouldn’t want Araminta for a mother, but she wouldn’t mind a life of parties, routs, and musicales.

“Let’s see,” Posy mused. “There was a review of Lady Worth’s recent ball, a bit about Viscount Guelph, who seems rather smitten with some girl from Scotland, and then a longish piece on the upcoming Bridgerton masquerade.”

Sophie sighed. She’d been reading about the upcoming masquerade for weeks, and even though she was nothing but