

The Rokesby Series:

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The Girl with the Make-
Believe Husband
The Other Miss Bridgerton
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To Sir Phillip, With Love
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BRIDGERTON



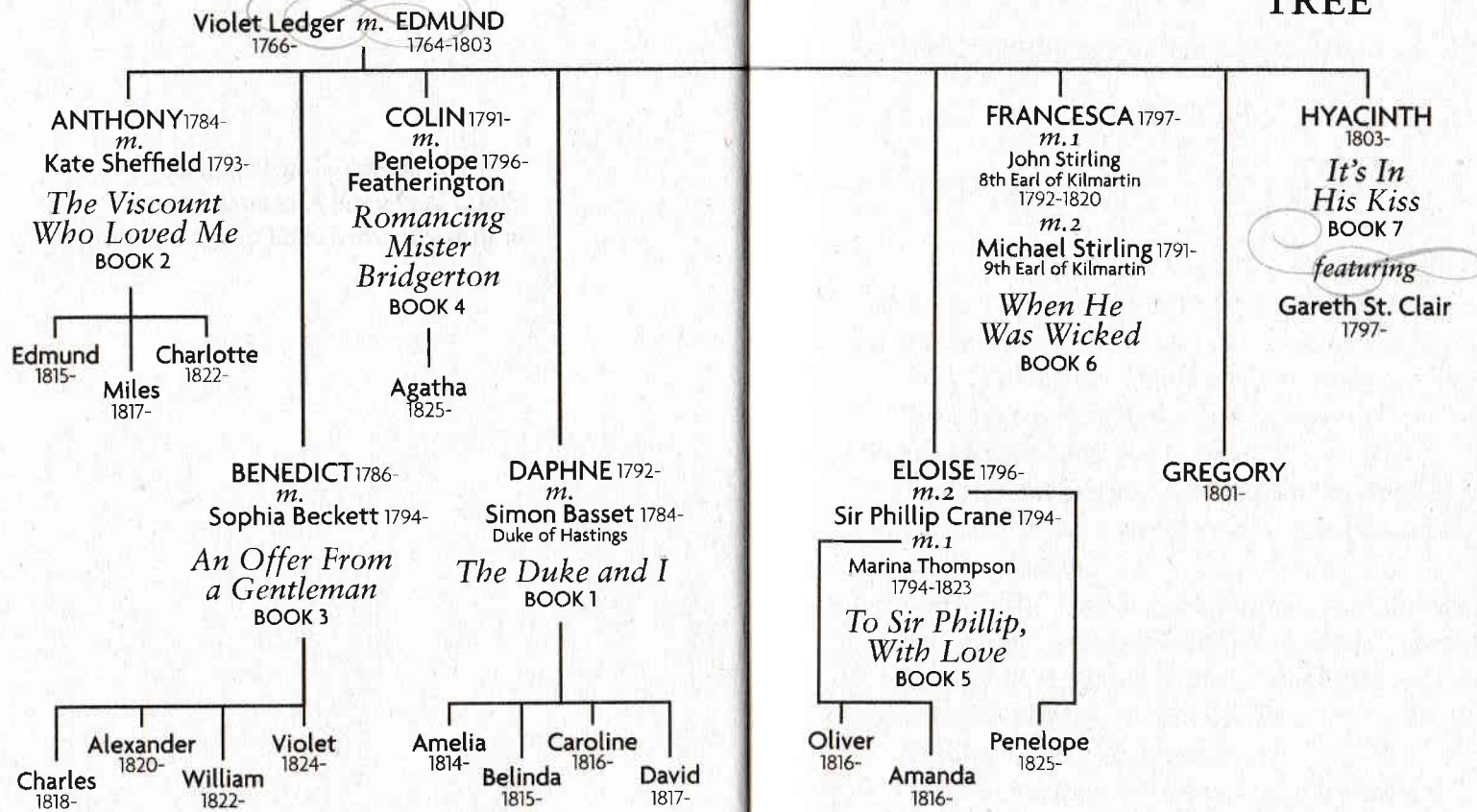
IT'S IN HIS KISS

JULIA QUINN



PIATKUS

Bridgerton FAMILY TREE



Prologue

1815, ten years before our story begins in earnest . . .

There were four principles governing Gareth St. Clair's relationship with his father that he relied upon to maintain his good humor and general sanity.

One: They did not converse unless absolutely necessary.

Two: All absolutely necessary conversations were to be kept as brief as possible.

Three: In the event that more than the simplest of salutations was to be spoken, it was always best to have a third party present.

And finally, four: For the purpose of achieving points one, two, and three, Gareth was to conduct himself in a manner so as to garner as many invitations as possible to spend school holidays with friends.

In other words, not at home.

In more precise words, away from his father.

All in all, Gareth thought, when he bothered to think about it, which wasn't often now that he had his avoidance tactics down to a science, these principles served him well.

And they served his father just as well, since Richard

St. Clair liked his younger son about as much as his younger son liked him. Which was why, Gareth thought with a frown, he'd been so surprised to be summoned home from school.

And with such force.

His father's missive had held little ambiguity. Gareth was to report to Clair Hall immediately.

It was dashed irritating, this. With only two months left at Eton, his life was in full swing at school, a heady mix of games and studies, and of course the occasional surreptitious foray to the local public house, always late at night, and always involving wine and women.

Gareth's life was exactly as a young man of eighteen years would wish it. And he'd been under the assumption that, as long as he managed to remain out of his father's line of sight, his life at nineteen would be similarly blessed. He was to attend Cambridge in the fall, along with all of his closest friends, where he had every intention of pursuing his studies and social life with equal fervor.

As he glanced around the foyer of Clair Hall, he let out a long sigh that was meant to sound impatient but came out more nervous than anything else. What on earth could the baron—as he had taken to calling his father—want with him? His father had long since announced that he had washed his hands of his younger son and that he was only paying for his education because it was expected of him.

Which everyone knew really meant: It would look bad to their friends and neighbors if Gareth wasn't sent to a proper school.

When Gareth and his father *did* cross paths, the baron

usually spent the entire time going on about what a disappointment the boy was.

Which only made Gareth wish to upset his father even more. Nothing like living down to expectations, after all.

Gareth tapped his foot, feeling rather like a stranger in his own home as he waited for the butler to alert his father as to his arrival. He'd spent so little time here in the last nine years it was difficult to feel much in the way of attachment. To him, it was nothing but a pile of stones that belonged to his father and would eventually go to his elder brother, George. Nothing of the house, and nothing of the St. Clair fortunes would come to Gareth, and he knew that his lot was to make his own way in the world. He supposed he would enter the military after Cambridge; the only other acceptable avenue of vocation was the clergy, and heaven knew he wasn't suited for *that*.

Gareth had few memories of his mother, who had died in an accident when he was five, but even he could recall her tousling his hair and laughing about how he was never serious.

"My little imp, you are," she used to say, followed by a whispered, "Don't lose that. Whatever you do, don't lose it."

He hadn't. And he rather doubted the Church of England would wish to welcome him into their ranks.

"Master Gareth."

Gareth looked up at the sound of the butler's voice. As always, Guilfoyle spoke in flat sentences, never queries.

"Your father will see you now," Guilfoyle intoned. "He is in his study."

Gareth nodded at the aging butler and made his way down the hall toward his father's study, always his least

favorite room in the house. It was where his father delivered his lectures, where his father told him he would never amount to anything, where his father icily speculated that he should never have had a second son, that Gareth was nothing but a drain on the family finances and a stain on their honor.

No, Gareth thought as he knocked on the door, no happy memories here.

“Enter!”

Gareth pushed open the heavy oak door and stepped inside. His father was seated behind his desk, scribbling something on a sheet of paper. He looked well, Gareth thought idly. His father always looked well. It would have been easier had he turned into a ruddy caricature of a man, but no, Lord St. Clair was fit and strong and gave the appearance of a man two decades younger than his fifty-odd years.

He looked like the sort of man a boy like Gareth ought to respect.

And it made the pain of rejection all the more cruel.

Gareth waited patiently for his father to look up. When he didn't, he cleared his throat.

No response.

Gareth coughed.

Nothing.

Gareth felt his teeth grinding. This was his father's routine—ignoring him for just long enough to act as a reminder that he found him beneath notice.

Gareth considered saying, “Sir.” He considered saying, “My lord.” He even considered uttering the word, “Father,” but in the end he just slouched against the doorjamb and started to whistle.

His father looked up immediately. “Cease,” he snapped. Gareth quirked a brow and silenced himself.

“And stand up straight. Good God,” the baron said testily, “how many times have I told you that whistling is ill-bred?”

Gareth waited a second, then asked, “Am I meant to answer that, or was it a rhetorical question?”

His father's skin reddened.

Gareth swallowed. He shouldn't have said that. He'd known that his deliberately jocular tone would infuriate the baron, but sometimes it was so damned hard to keep his mouth shut. He'd spent years trying to win his father's favor, and he'd finally given in and given up.

And if he took some satisfaction in making the old man as miserable as the old man made him, well, so be it. One had to take one's pleasures where one could.

“I am surprised you're here,” his father said.

Gareth blinked in confusion. “You asked me to come,” he said. And the miserable truth was—he'd never defied his father. Not really. He poked, he prodded, he added a touch of insolence to his every statement and action, but he had never behaved with out-and-out defiance.

Miserable coward that he was.

In his dreams, he fought back. In his dreams, he told his father exactly what he thought of him, but in reality, his defiance was limited to whistles and sullen looks.

“So I did,” his father said, leaning back slightly in his chair. “Nonetheless, I never issue an order with the expectation that you will follow it correctly. You so rarely do.”

Gareth said nothing.

His father stood and walked to a nearby table, where

he kept a decanter of brandy. "I imagine you're wondering what this is all about," he said.

Gareth nodded, but his father didn't bother to look at him, so he added, "Yes, sir."

The baron took an appreciative sip of his brandy, leaving Gareth waiting while he visibly savored the amber liquid. Finally, he turned, and with a coolly assessing stare said, "I have finally discovered a way for you to be useful to the St. Clair family."

Gareth's head jerked in surprise. "You have? Sir?"

His father took another drink, then set his glass down. "Indeed." He turned to his son and looked at him directly for the first time during the interview. "You will be getting married."

"Sir?" Gareth said, nearly gagging on the word.

"This summer," Lord St. Clair confirmed.

Gareth grabbed the back of a chair to keep from swerving. He was eighteen, for God's sake. Far too young to marry. And what about Cambridge? Could he even attend as a married man? And where would he put his wife?

And, good God above, *whom* was he supposed to marry?

"It's an excellent match," the baron continued. "The dowry will restore our finances."

"Our finances, sir?" Gareth whispered.

Lord St. Clair's eyes clamped down on his son's. "We're mortgaged to the hilt," he said sharply. "Another year, and we will lose everything that isn't entailed."

"But . . . how?"

"Eton doesn't come cheap," the baron snapped.

No, but surely it wasn't enough to beggar the family, Gareth thought desperately. This couldn't be *all* his fault.

"Disappointment you may be," his father said, "but I

have not shirked my responsibilities to you. You have been educated as a gentleman. You have been given a horse, clothing, and a roof over your head. Now it is time you behaved like a man."

"Who?" Gareth whispered.

"Eh?"

"Who," he said a little louder. Whom was he meant to marry?

"Mary Winthrop," his father said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Gareth felt the blood leave his body. "Mary . . ."

"Wrotham's daughter," his father added.

As if Gareth didn't know that. "But Mary . . ."

"Will be an excellent wife," the baron continued. "Biddable, and you can dump her in the country should you wish to gad about town with your foolish friends."

"But Father, Mary—"

"I accepted on your behalf," his father stated. "It's done. The agreements have been signed."

Gareth fought for air. This couldn't be happening. Surely a man could not be forced into marriage. Not in this day and age.

"Wrotham would like to see it done in July," his father added. "I told him we have no objections."

"But . . . Mary . . ." Gareth gasped. "I can't marry Mary!"

One of his father's bushy brows inched toward his hairline. "You can, and you will."

"But Father, she's . . . she's . . ."

"Simple?" the baron finished for him. He chuckled. "Won't make a difference when she's under you in bed. And you don't have to have anything to do with her other-

wise." He walked toward his son until they were uncomfortably close. "All you need to do is show up at the church. Do you understand?"

Gareth said nothing. He didn't *do* much of anything, either. It was all he could manage just to breathe.

He'd known Mary Winthrop his entire life. She was a year his elder, and their families' estates had bordered on one another's for over a century. They'd been playmates as young children, but it soon became apparent that Mary wasn't quite right in the head. Gareth had remained her champion whenever he was in the district; he'd bloodied more than one bully who had thought to call her names or take advantage of her sweet and unassuming nature.

But he couldn't *marry* her. She was like a child. It had to be a sin. And even if it wasn't, he could never stomach it. How could she possibly understand what was meant to transpire between them as man and wife?

He could never bed her. Never.

Gareth just stared at his father, words failing him. For the first time in his life, he had no easy reply, no flip retort.

There were no words. Simply no words for such a moment.

"I see we understand each other," the baron said, smiling at his son's silence.

"No!" Gareth burst out, the single syllable ripping itself from his throat. "No! I can't!"

His father's eyes narrowed. "You'll be there if I have to tie you up."

"No!" He felt like he was choking, but somehow he got the words out. "Father, Mary is . . . Well, she's a child. She'll never be more than a child. You know that. I can't marry her. It would be a sin."

The baron chuckled, breaking the tension as he turned swiftly away. "Are you trying to convince me that you, of all people, have suddenly found religion?"

"No, but—"

"There is nothing to discuss," his father cut in. "Wrotham has been extremely generous with the dowry. God knows he has to be, trying to unload an idiot."

"Don't speak of her that way," Gareth whispered. He might not want to marry Mary Winthrop, but he'd known her all his life, and she did not deserve such talk.

"It is the best you will ever do," Lord St. Clair said. "The best you will ever have. Wrotham's settlement is extraordinarily generous, and I will arrange for an allowance that will keep you comfortable for life."

"An allowance," Gareth echoed dully.

His father let out one short chuckle. "Don't think I would trust you with a lump sum," he said. "You?"

Gareth swallowed uncomfortably. "What about school?" he whispered.

"You can still attend," his father said. "In fact, you have your new bride to thank for that. Wouldn't have had the blunt to send you without the marriage settlement."

Gareth stood there, trying to force his breathing into something that felt remotely even and normal. His father knew how much it meant to him to attend Cambridge. It was the one thing upon which the two of them agreed: A gentleman needed a gentleman's education. It didn't matter that Gareth craved the entire experience, both social and academic, whereas Lord St. Clair saw it merely as something a man had to do to keep up appearances. It had been decided upon for years—Gareth would attend and receive his degree.

But now it seemed that Lord St. Clair had known that he could not pay for his younger son's education. When had he planned to tell him? As Gareth was packing his bags?

"It's done, Gareth," his father said sharply. "And it has to be you. George is the heir, and I can't have him sully-ing the bloodlines. Besides," he added with pursed lips, "I wouldn't subject him to this, anyway."

"But you would me?" Gareth whispered. Was this how much his father hated him? How little he thought of him? He looked up at his father, at the face that had brought him so much unhappiness. There had never been a smile, never an encouraging word. Never a—

"Why?" Gareth heard himself saying, the word sound-ing like a wounded animal, pathetic and plaintive. "Why?" he said again.

His father said nothing, just stood there, gripping the edge of his desk until his knuckles grew white. And Gareth could do nothing but stare, somehow transfixed by the ordinary sight of his father's hands. "I'm your son," he whispered, still unable to move his gaze from his father's hands to his face. "Your son. How could you do this to your own son?"

And then his father, who was the master of the cutting retort, whose anger always came dressed in ice rather than fire, exploded. His hands flew from the table, and his voice roared through the room like a demon.

"By God, how could you not have figured it out by now? You are not my son! You have never been my son! You are nothing but a by-blow, some mangy whelp your mother got off another man while I was away."

Rage poured forth like some hot, desperate thing, too long held captive and repressed. It hit Gareth like a

wave, swirling around him, squeezing and choking until he could barely breathe. "No," he said, desperately shaking his head. It was nothing he hadn't considered, nothing he hadn't even hoped for, but it couldn't be true. He *looked* like his father. They had the same nose, didn't they? And—

"I have fed you," the baron said, his voice low and hard. "I have clothed you and presented you to the world as my son. I have supported you when another man would have tossed you into the street, and it is well past time that you returned the favor."

"No," Gareth said again. "It can't be. I look like you. I—"

For a moment Lord St. Clair remained silent. Then he said, bitterly, "An unhappy coincidence, I assure you."

"But—"

"I could have turned you out at your birth," Lord St. Clair cut in, "sent your mother packing, tossed you both into the street. But I did not." He closed the distance between them and put his face very close to Gareth's. "You have been acknowledged, and you are legitimate." And then, in a voice furious and low: "You owe me."

"No," Gareth said, his voice finally finding the conviction he was going to need to last him through the rest of his days. "No. I won't do it."

"I will cut you off," the baron warned. "You won't see another penny from me. You can forget your dreams of Cambridge, your—"

"No," Gareth said again, and he sounded different. He felt changed. This was the end, he realized. The end of his childhood, the end of his innocence, and the beginning of—

God only knew what it was the beginning of.

"I am through with you," his father—no, not his father—hissed. "Through."

"So be it," Gareth said.

And he walked away.

Chapter 1

Ten years have passed, and we meet our heroine, who, it must be said, has never been known as a shy and retiring flower. The scene is the annual Smythe-Smith musicale, about ten minutes before Mr. Mozart begins to rot in his grave.

"Why do we do this to ourselves?" Hyacinth Bridgerton wondered aloud.

"Because we are good, kind people," her sister-in-law replied, sitting in—God help them—a front-row seat.

"One would think," Hyacinth persisted, regarding the empty chair next to Penelope with the same excitement she might show a sea urchin, "that we would have learned our lesson last year. Or perhaps the year before that. Or maybe even—"

"Hyacinth?" Penelope said.

Hyacinth swung her gaze to Penelope, lifting one brow in question.

"Sit."

Hyacinth sighed. But she sat.

The Smythe-Smith musicale. Thankfully, it came

around just once per year, because Hyacinth was quite certain it would take a full twelve months for her ears to recover.

Hyacinth let out another sigh, this one louder than the last. "I'm not entirely certain that I'm either good or kind."

"I'm not certain, either," Penelope said, "but I have decided to have faith in you nevertheless."

"Rather sporting of you," Hyacinth said.

"I thought so."

Hyacinth glanced at her sideways. "Of course you did not have any choice in the matter."

Penelope turned in her seat, her eyes narrowing. "Meaning?"

"Colin refused to accompany you, didn't he?" Hyacinth said with a sly look. Colin was Hyacinth's brother, and he'd married Penelope a year earlier.

Penelope clamped her mouth into a firm line.

"I do love it when I am right," Hyacinth said triumphantly. "Which is fortunate, since I so often am."

Penelope just looked at her. "You do know that you are insufferable."

"Of course." Hyacinth leaned toward Penelope with a devilish smile. "But you love me, anyway, admit it."

"I admit nothing until the end of the evening."

"After we have both gone deaf?"

"After we see if you behave yourself."

Hyacinth laughed. "You married into the family. You have to love me. It's a contractual obligation."

"Funny how I don't recall that in the wedding vows."

"Funny," Hyacinth returned, "I remember it perfectly."

Penelope looked at her and laughed. "I don't know

how you do it, Hyacinth," she said, "but exasperating as you are, you somehow always manage to be charming."

"It's my greatest gift," Hyacinth said demurely.

"Well, you do receive extra points for coming with me tonight," Penelope said, patting her on the hand.

"Of course," Hyacinth replied. "For all my insufferable ways, I am in truth the soul of kindness and amiability." And she'd have to be, she thought, as she watched the scene unfolding on the small, makeshift stage. Another year, another Smythe-Smith musicale. Another opportunity to learn just how many ways one could ruin a perfectly good piece of music. Every year Hyacinth swore she wouldn't attend, then every year she somehow found herself at the event, smiling encouragingly at the four girls on the stage.

"At least last year I got to sit in the back," Hyacinth said.

"Yes, you did," Penelope replied, turning on her with suspicious eyes. "How did you manage that? Felicity, Eloise, and I were all up front."

Hyacinth shrugged. "A well-timed visit to the ladies' retiring room. In fact—"

"Don't you dare try that tonight," Penelope warned. "If you leave me up here by myself . . ."

"Don't worry," Hyacinth said with a sigh. "I am here for the duration. But," she added, pointing her finger in what her mother would surely have termed a most unladylike manner, "I want my devotion to you to be duly noted."

"Why is it," Penelope asked, "that I am left with the feeling that you are keeping score of something, and when I least expect it, you will jump out in front of me, demanding a favor?"