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BRIDGERTON

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ON THE WAY TO THE WEDDING

JULIA QUINN

LBRIS

We know
books

**On the Way to
the Wedding**

*Prologue*

*London, not far from St. George's, Hanover Square
Summer, 1827*

*H*is lungs were on fire.

Gregory Bridgerton was running. Through the streets of London, oblivious to the curious stares of onlookers, he was running.

There was a strange, powerful rhythm to his movements—*one two three four, one two three four*—that pushed him along, propelling him forward even as his mind remained focused on one thing and one thing only.

The church.

He had to get to the church.

He had to stop the wedding.

How long had he been running? One minute? Five? He

couldn't know, couldn't concentrate on anything but his destination.

The church. He had to get to the church.

It had started at eleven. This thing. This ceremony. This thing that should never have happened. But she'd done it anyway. And he had to stop it. He had to stop *her*. He didn't know how, and he certainly didn't know why, but she was doing it, and it was wrong.

She had to know that it was wrong.

She was *his*. They belonged together. She knew that. God damn it all, she knew that.

How long did a wedding ceremony take? Five minutes? Ten? Twenty? He'd never paid attention before, certainly never thought to check his watch at the beginning and end.

Never thought he'd need the information. Never thought it would matter this much.

How long had he been running? Two minutes? Ten?

He skidded around a corner and onto Regent Street, grunting something that was meant to take the place of "Excuse me," as he bumped into a respectably dressed gentleman, knocking his case to the ground.

Normally Gregory would have stopped to aid the gentleman, bent to retrieve the case, but not today, not this morning.

Not now.

The church. He had to get to the church. He could not think of anything else. He must not. He must—

Damn! He skidded to a halt as a carriage cut in front of him. Resting his hands on his thighs—not because he wanted to, but rather because his desperate body demanded it—he sucked in huge gulps of air, trying to relieve the screaming pressure in his chest, that horrible burning, tearing feeling as—

The carriage moved past and he was off again. He was close now. He could do it. It couldn't have been more than

five minutes since he'd left the house. Maybe six. It felt like thirty, but it couldn't have been more than seven.

He had to stop this. It was wrong. He had to stop it. He *would* stop it.

He could see the church. Off in the distance, its gray steeple rising into the bright blue sky. Someone had hung flowers from the lanterns. He couldn't tell what kind they were—yellow and white, yellow mostly. They spilled forth with reckless abandon, bursting from the baskets. They looked celebratory, cheerful even, and it was all so wrong. This was not a cheerful day. It was not an event to be celebrated.

And he *would* stop it.

He slowed down just enough so that he could run up the steps without falling on his face, and then he wrenched the door open, wide, wider, barely hearing the slam as it crashed into the outer wall. Maybe he should have paused for breath. Maybe he should have entered quietly, giving himself a moment to assess the situation, to gauge how far along they were.

The church went silent. The priest stopped his drone, and every spine in every pew twisted until every face was turned to the back.

To him.

"Don't," Gregory gasped, but he was so short of breath, he could barely hear the word.

"Don't," he said, louder this time, clutching the edge of the pews as he staggered forward. "Don't do it."

She said nothing, but he saw her. He saw her, her mouth open with shock. He saw her bouquet slip from her hands, and he knew—by God he knew that she'd stopped breathing.

She looked so beautiful. Her golden hair seemed to catch the light, and it shone with a radiance that filled him with strength. He straightened, still breathing hard, but he could walk unassisted now, and he let go of the pew.

"Don't do it," he said again, moving toward her with the stealthy grace of a man who knows what he wants.

Who knows what should be.

Still she didn't speak. No one did. It was strange, that. Three hundred of London's biggest busybodies, gathered into one building, and no one could utter a word. No one could take his eyes off him as he walked down the aisle.

"I love you," he said, right there, right in front of everyone. Who cared? He would not keep this a secret. He would not let her marry someone else without making sure all the world knew that she owned his heart.

"I love you," he said again, and out of the corner of his eye he could see his mother and sister, seated primly in a pew, their mouths open with shock.

He kept walking. Down the aisle, each step more confident, more sure.

"Don't do it," he said, stepping out of the aisle and into the apse. "Don't marry him."

"Gregory," she whispered. "Why are you doing this?"

"I love you," he said, because it was the only thing to say. It was the only thing that mattered.

Her eyes glistened, and he could see her breath catch in her throat. She looked up at the man she was trying to marry. His brows rose as he gave her a tiny, one-shouldered shrug, as if to say, *It is your choice.*

Gregory sank to one knee. "Marry me," he said, his very soul in his words. "Marry me."

He stopped breathing. The entire church stopped breathing.

She brought her eyes to his. They were huge and clear and everything he'd ever thought was good and kind and true.

"Marry me," he whispered, one last time.

Her lips were trembling, but her voice was clear when she said—



One

In which Our Hero falls in love.

Two months earlier

Unlike most men of his acquaintance, Gregory Bridgerton believed in true love.

He'd have to have been a fool not to.

Consider the following:

His eldest brother, Anthony.

His eldest sister, Daphne.

His other brothers, Benedict and Colin, not to mention his sisters, Eloise, Francesca, and (galling but true) Hyacinth, all of whom—all of whom—were quite happily besotted with their spouses.

For most men, such a state of affairs would produce nothing quite so much as bile, but for Gregory, who had been born with an uncommonly cheerful, if occasionally (according to

his younger sister) annoying, spirit, it simply meant that he had no choice but to believe the obvious:

Love existed.

It was not a wispy figment of the imagination, designed to keep the poets from complete starvation. It might not be something that one could see or smell or touch, but it was out there, and it was only a matter of time before he, too, found the woman of his dreams and settled down to be fruitful, multiply, and take on such baffling hobbies as papier-mâché and the collection of nutmeg graters.

Although, if one wanted to put a fine point on it, which did seem rather precise for such an abstract sort of concept, his dreams didn't exactly include a woman. Well, not one with any specific and identifiable attributes. He didn't know anything about this woman of his, the one who was supposed to transform his life completely, turning him into a happy pillar of boredom and respectability. He didn't know if she would be short or tall, dark or fair. He'd like to think she would be intelligent and in possession of a fine sense of humor, but beyond that, how was he to know? She could be shy or outspoken. She might like to sing. Or maybe not. Maybe she was a horsewoman, with a ruddy complexion born of too much time out of doors.

He didn't know. When it came to this woman, this impossible, wonderful, and currently nonexistent woman, all he really knew was that when he found her . . .

He'd know.

He didn't know how he'd know; he just knew that he would. Something this momentous, this earth-shattering and life-altering . . . well, really, it wasn't going to whisper its way into existence. It would come full and forceful, like the proverbial ton of bricks. The only question was when.

And in the meantime, he saw no reason not to have a fine time while he anticipated her arrival. One didn't need to behave like a monk while waiting for one's true love, after all.

Gregory was, by all accounts, a fairly typical man about London, with a comfortable—although by no means extravagant—allowance, plenty of friends, and a level enough head to know when to quit a gaming table. He was considered a decent enough catch on the Marriage Mart, if not precisely the top selection (fourth sons never did command a great deal of attention), and he was always in demand when the society matrons needed an eligible man to even up the numbers at dinner parties.

Which did make his aforementioned allowance stretch a bit further—always a benefit.

Perhaps he ought to have had a bit more purpose in his life. Some sort of direction, or even just a meaningful task to complete. But that could wait, couldn't it? Soon, he was sure, everything would come clear. He would know just what it was he wished to do, and whom he wished to do it with, and in the meantime, he'd—

Not have a fine time. Not just at *this* moment, at least.

To explain:

Gregory was presently sitting in a leather chair, a rather accommodating one, not that that really had any bearing on the matter other than the fact that the lack of discomfort was conducive to daydreaming, which in turn was conducive to not listening to his brother, who, it should be noted, was standing approximately four feet away, droning on about something or other, almost certainly involving some variation of the words *duty* and *responsibility*.

Gregory wasn't really paying attention. He rarely did.

Well, no, occasionally he did, but—

“Gregory? Gregory!”

He looked up, blinking. Anthony's arms were crossed, never a good sign. Anthony was the Viscount Bridgerton, and had been for more than twenty years. And while he was, Gregory would be the first to insist, the very best of brothers, he would have made a rather fine feudal lord.

"Begging your pardon for intruding upon your thoughts, such as they are," Anthony said in a dry voice, "but have you, perhaps—just perhaps—heard anything I've said?"

"Diligence," Gregory parroted, nodding with what he deemed sufficient gravity. "Direction."

"Indeed," Anthony replied, and Gregory congratulated himself on what had clearly been an inspired performance. "It was well past time that you finally sought some direction in your life."

"Of course," Gregory murmured, mostly because he'd missed supper, and he was hungry, and he'd heard that his sister-in-law was serving light refreshments in the garden. Besides, it never made sense to argue with Anthony. Never.

"You must make a change. Choose a new course."

"Indeed." Maybe there would be sandwiches. He could eat about forty of those ridiculous little ones with the crusts cut off right then.

"Gregory."

Anthony's voice held that tone. The one that, while impossible to describe, was easy enough to recognize. And Gregory knew it was time to pay attention.

"Right," he said, because truly, it was remarkable how well a single syllable could delay a proper sentence. "I expect I'll join the clergy."

That stopped Anthony cold. Dead, frozen, cold. Gregory paused to savor the moment. Too bad he had to become a bloody vicar to achieve it.

"I beg your pardon," Anthony finally murmured.

"It's not as if I've many choices," Gregory said. And as the words emerged, he realized it was the first time he'd spoken them. It somehow made them more real, more permanent. "It's the military or the clergy," he continued, "and, well, it's got to be said—I'm a beastly bad shot."

Anthony didn't say anything. They all knew it was true.

After a moment of awkward silence, Anthony murmured, "There are swords."

"Yes, but with my luck I'll be posted to the Sudan." Gregory shuddered. "Not to be overly fastidious, but really, the heat. Would *you* want to go?"

Anthony demurred immediately. "No, of course not."

"And," Gregory added, beginning to enjoy himself, "there is Mother."

There was a pause. Then: "She pertains to the Sudan . . . how?"

"She wouldn't very well like my going, and then you, you must know, will be the one who must hold her hand every time she worries, or has some ghastly nightmare about—"

"Say no more," Anthony interrupted.

Gregory allowed himself an inner smile. It really wasn't fair to his mother, who, it was only sporting to point out, had never once claimed to portend the future with anything so wispy as a dream. But she *would* hate his going to the Sudan, and Anthony *would* have to listen to her worry over it.

And as Gregory didn't particularly wish to depart England's misty shores, the point was moot, anyway.

"Right," Anthony said. "Right. I am glad, then, that we have finally been able to have this conversation."

Gregory eyed the clock.

Anthony cleared his throat, and when he spoke, there was an edge of impatience to his voice. "And that you are finally thinking toward your future."

Gregory felt something tighten at the back of his jaw. "I am but six-and-twenty," he reminded him. "Surely too young for such repeated use of the word *finally*."

Anthony just arched a brow. "Shall I contact the archbishop? See about finding you a parish?"

Gregory's chest twisted into an unexpected coughing spasm. "Er, no," he said, when he was able. "Not yet, at least."

One corner of Anthony's mouth moved. But not by much, and not, by any stretch of the definition, into a smile. "You could marry," he said softly.

"I could," Gregory agreed. "And I shall. In fact, I plan to."
"Really?"

"When I find the right woman." And then, at Anthony's dubious expression, Gregory added, "Surely you, of all people, would recommend a match of love over convenience."

Anthony was rather famously besotted with his wife, who was in turn rather inexplicably besotted with him. Anthony was also rather famously devoted to his seven younger siblings, so Gregory should not have felt such an unexpected wellspring of emotion when he softly said, "I wish you every happiness that I myself enjoy."

Gregory was saved from having to make a reply by the very loud rumbling of his stomach. He gave his brother a sheepish expression. "Sorry. I missed supper."

"I know. We expected you earlier."

Gregory avoided wincing. Just.

"Kate was somewhat put out."

That was the worst. When Anthony was disappointed that was one thing. But when he claimed that his wife had been somehow pained . . .

Well, that was when Gregory *knew* he was in trouble. "Got a late start from London," he mumbled. It was the truth, but still, no excuse for bad behavior. He had been expected at the house party in time for supper, and he had not come through. He almost said, "I shall make it up to her," but at the last moment bit his tongue. Somehow that would make it worse, he knew, almost as if he was making light of his tardiness, assuming that he could smooth over any transgression with a smile and a glib comment. Which he often could, but for some reason this time—

He didn't want to.

So instead he just said, "I'm sorry." And he meant it, too.

"She's in the garden," Anthony said gruffly. "I think she means to have dancing—on the patio, if you can believe it."

Gregory could. It sounded exactly like his sister-in-law. She wasn't the sort to let any serendipitous moment pass her by, and with the weather so uncommonly fine, why not organize an impromptu dance *al fresco*?

"See that you dance with whomever she wishes," Anthony said. "Kate won't like any of the young ladies to feel left out."

"Of course not," Gregory murmured.

"I will join you in a quarter of an hour," Anthony said, moving back to his desk, where several piles of paper awaited him. "I have a few items here yet to complete."

Gregory stood. "I shall pass that along to Kate." And then, the interview quite clearly at an end, he left the room and headed out to the garden.

It had been some time since he'd been to Aubrey Hall, the ancestral home of the Bridgertons. The family gathered here in Kent for Christmas, of course, but in truth, it wasn't home for Gregory, and never really had been. After his father had died, his mother had done the unconventional and uprooted her family, electing to spend most of the year in London. She had never said so, but Gregory had always suspected that the graceful old house held too many memories.

As a result, Gregory had always felt more at home in town than in the country. Bridgerton House, in London, was the home of his childhood, not Aubrey Hall. Still, he enjoyed his visits, and he was always game for bucolic pursuits, such as riding and swimming (when the lake was warm enough to permit it), and strangely enough, he liked the change of pace. He liked the way the air felt quiet and clean after months in the city.

And he liked the way he could leave it all behind when it grew *too* quiet and clean.