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Whistledown's Official Guide

Miss Butterworth and the
Mad Baron (graphic novel)

BRIDGERTON



THE VISCOUNT
WHO LOVED ME

JULIA QUINN



PIATKUS

*Prologue*

*A*nthony Bridgerton had always known he would die young.

Oh, not as a child. Young Anthony had never had cause to ponder his own mortality. His early years had been a young boy's perfection, right from the very day of his birth.

It was true that Anthony was the heir to an ancient and wealthy viscountcy, but unlike most other aristocratic couples, Lord and Lady Bridgerton were very much in love, and they saw their son's birth not as the arrival of an heir, but rather that of a child.

And so there were no parties, no fêtes, no celebration other than that of mother and father staring in wonderment at their new son.

The Bridgertons were young parents—Edmund barely twenty and Violet just eighteen—but they were sensible and they were strong, and they loved their son with a fierceness and devotion that was rarely seen in their social circles. Much to her own mother's horror, Violet insisted upon nursing the boy herself, and Edmund never subscribed to the prevailing attitude that fathers should neither see nor hear their children. He took the infant on long hikes across the fields of Kent, spoke to him of philosophy and poetry before he could possibly understand the words, and told him a bedtime story every night.

Because the viscount and viscountess were so young

and so very much in love, it came as no surprise to anyone when, just two years after Anthony's birth, he was joined by a younger brother, christened Benedict. Edmund immediately adjusted his daily routine to take two sons on his hikes, and he spent a week holed up in the stables, working with his leatherworker to devise a special pack that would hold Anthony on his back while he held the baby Benedict in his arms.

They walked across fields and streams, and he told them of wondrous things, of perfect flowers and clear blue skies, of knights in shining armor and damsels in distress. Violet used to laugh when they returned all windblown and sun-kissed, and Edmund would say, "See? Here is our damsel in distress. Clearly we must save her." And Anthony would throw himself into his mother's arms, giggling as he swore he'd protect her from the fire-breathing dragon they'd seen just *two miles down the road* in the village.

"Two miles down the road in the village?" Violet would breathe, keeping her voice carefully laden with horror. "Heaven above, what would I do without three strong men to protect me?"

"Benedict's a baby," Anthony would reply.

"But he'll grow up," she'd always say, tousling his hair, "just as you did. And just as you still will."

Edmund always treated his children with equal affection and devotion, but late at night, when Anthony cradled the Bridgerton pocket watch to his chest (given to him on his eighth birthday by his father, who had received it on his eighth birthday from *his* father), he liked to think that his relationship with his father was just a little bit special. Not because Edmund loved him best; by that point the Bridgerton siblings numbered four (Colin and Daphne had arrived fairly close together) and Anthony knew very well that all the children were well loved.

No, Anthony liked to think that his relationship with his father was special simply because he'd known him the longest. After all, no matter how long Benedict had known

their father, Anthony would always have two years on him. And six on Colin. And as for Daphne, well, besides the fact that she was a girl (the horror!), she'd known Father a full eight years less than he had and, he liked to remind himself, always would.

Edmund Bridgerton was, quite simply, the very center of Anthony's world. He was tall, his shoulders were broad, and he could ride a horse as if he'd been born in the saddle. He always knew the answers to arithmetic questions (even when the tutor didn't), he saw no reason why his sons should not have a tree house (and then he went and built it himself), and his laugh was the sort that warmed a body from the inside out.

Edmund taught Anthony how to ride. He taught Anthony how to shoot. He taught him to swim. He took him off to Eton himself, rather than sending him in a carriage with servants, as most of Anthony's future friends arrived, and when he saw Anthony glancing nervously about the school that would become his new home, he had a heart-to-heart talk with his eldest son, assuring him that everything would be all right.

And it was. Anthony knew it would be. His father, after all, never lied.

Anthony loved his mother. Hell, he'd probably bite off his own arm if it meant keeping her safe and well. But growing up, everything he did, every accomplishment, every goal, every single hope and dream—it was all for his father.

And then one day, everything changed. It was funny, he reflected later, how one's life could alter in an instant, how one minute everything could be a certain way, and the next it's simply . . . not.

It happened when Anthony was eighteen, home for the summer and preparing for his first year at Oxford. He was to belong to All Souls College, as his father had before him, and his life was as bright and dazzling as any eighteen-year-old had a right to enjoy. He had discovered

women, and perhaps more splendidly, they had discovered him. His parents were still happily reproducing, having added Eloise, Francesca, and Gregory to the family, and Anthony did his best not to roll his eyes when he passed his mother in the hall—pregnant with her *eighth* child! It was all a bit unseemly, in Anthony's opinion, having children at their age, but he kept his opinions to himself.

Who was he to doubt Edmund's wisdom? Maybe he, too, would want more children at the advanced age of thirty-eight.

When Anthony found out, it was late afternoon. He was returning from a long and bruising ride with Benedict and had just pushed through the front door of Aubrey Hall, the ancestral home of the Bridgertons, when he saw his ten-year-old-sister sitting on the floor. Benedict was still in the stables, having lost some silly bet with Anthony, the terms of which required him to rub down both horses.

Anthony stopped short when he saw Daphne. It was odd enough that his sister was sitting in the middle of the floor in the main hall. It was even more odd that she was crying.

Daphne never cried.

"Daff," he said hesitantly, too young to know what to do with a crying female and wondering if he'd ever learn, "what—"

But before he could finish his question, Daphne lifted her head, and the shattering heartbreak in her large brown eyes cut through him like a knife. He stumbled back a step, knowing something was wrong, terribly wrong.

"He'd dead," Daphne whispered. "Papa is dead."

For a moment Anthony was sure he'd misheard. His father couldn't be dead. Other people died young, like Uncle Hugo, but Uncle Hugo had been small and frail. Well, at least smaller and frailer than Edmund.

"You're wrong," he told Daphne. "You must be wrong."

She shook her head. "Eloise told me. He was . . . it was . . ."

Anthony knew he shouldn't shake his sister while she

sobbed, but he couldn't help himself. "It was *what*, Daphne?"

"A bee," she whispered. "He was stung by a bee."

For a moment Anthony could do nothing but stare at her. Finally, his voice hoarse and barely recognizable, he said, "A man doesn't die from a bee sting, Daphne."

She said nothing, just sat there on the floor, her throat working convulsively as she tried to control her tears.

"He's been stung before," Anthony added, his voice rising in volume. "I was with him. We were both stung. We came across a nest. I was stung on the shoulder." Unbidden, his hand rose to touch the spot where he'd been stung so many years before. In a whisper he added, "He on his arm."

Daphne just stared at him with an eerily blank expression.

"He was fine," Anthony insisted. He could hear the panic in his voice and knew he was frightening his sister, but he was powerless to control it. "A man can't die from a bee sting!"

Daphne shook her head, her dark eyes suddenly looking about a hundred years old. "It was a bee," she said in a hollow voice. "Eloise saw it. One minute he was just standing there, and the next he was . . . he was . . ."

Anthony felt something very strange building within him, as if his muscles were about to jump through his skin. "The next he was *what*, Daphne?"

"Gone." She looked bewildered by the word, as bewildered as he felt.

Anthony left Daphne sitting in the hall and took the stairs three at a time up to his parents' bedchamber. Surely his father wasn't dead. A man couldn't die from a bee sting. It was impossible. Utterly mad. Edmund Bridgerton was young, he was strong. He was tall, his shoulders were broad, his muscles were powerful, and by God, no insignificant honeybee could have felled him.

But when Anthony reached the upstairs hall, he could

tell by the utter and complete silence of the dozen or so hovering servants that the situation was grim.

And their pitying faces . . . for the rest of his life he'd be haunted by those pitying faces.

He'd thought he'd have to push his way into his parents' room, but the servants parted as if they were drops in the Red Sea, and when Anthony pushed open the door, he knew.

His mother was sitting on the edge of the bed, not weeping, not even making a sound, just holding his father's hand as she rocked slowly back and forth.

His father was still. Still as . . .

Anthony didn't even want to think the word.

"Mama?" he choked out. He hadn't called her that for years; she'd been "Mother" since he'd left for Eton.

She turned, slowly, as if hearing his voice through a long, long tunnel.

"What happened?" he whispered.

She shook her head, her eyes hopelessly far away. "I don't know," she said. Her lips remained parted by an inch or so, as if she'd meant to say something more but then forgotten to do it.

Anthony took a step forward, his movements awkward and jerky.

"He's gone," Violet finally whispered. "He's gone and I . . . oh, God, I . . ." She placed a hand on her belly, full and round with child. "I told him—oh, Anthony, I told him—"

She looked as if she might shatter from the inside out. Anthony choked back the tears that were burning his eyes and stinging his throat and moved to her side. "It's all right, Mama," he said.

But he knew it wasn't all right.

"I told him this had to be our last," she gasped, sobbing onto his shoulder. "I told him I couldn't carry another, and we'd have to be careful, and . . . Oh, God, Anthony, what I'd do to have him here and give him another child. I don't understand. I just don't understand. . . ."

Anthony held her while she cried. He said nothing; it seemed useless to try to make any words fit the devastation in his heart.

He didn't understand, either.

The doctors came later that evening and pronounced themselves baffled. They'd heard of such things before, but never in one so young and strong. He was so vital, so powerful; nobody could have known. It was true that the viscount's younger brother Hugo had died quite suddenly the year before, but such things did not necessarily run in families, and besides, even though Hugo had died by himself out-of-doors, no one had noticed a bee sting on his skin.

Then again, nobody had looked.

Nobody could have known, the doctors kept saying, over and over until Anthony wanted to strangle them all. Eventually he got them out of the house, and he put his mother to bed. They had to move her into a spare bedroom; she grew agitated at the thought of sleeping in the bed she'd shared for so many years with Edmund. Anthony managed to send his six siblings to bed as well, telling them that they'd all talk in the morning, that everything would be well, and he would take care of them as their father would have wanted.

Then he walked into the room where his father's body still lay and looked at him. He looked at him and looked at him, staring at him for hours, barely blinking.

And when he left the room, he left with a new vision of his own life, and new knowledge about his own mortality.

Edmund Bridgerton had died at the age of thirty-eight. And Anthony simply couldn't imagine ever surpassing his father in any way, even in years.



Chapter 1

The topic of rakes has, of course, been previously discussed in this column, and This Author has come to the conclusion that there are rakes, and there are Rakes.

Anthony Bridgerton is a Rake.

A rake (lower-case) is youthful and immature. He flaunts his exploits, behaves with utmost idiocy, and thinks himself dangerous to women.

A Rake (upper-case) knows he is dangerous to women.

He doesn't flaunt his exploits because he doesn't need to. He knows he will be whispered about by men and women alike, and in fact, he'd rather they didn't whisper about him at all. He knows who he is and what he has done; further recountings are, to him, redundant.

He doesn't behave like an idiot for the simple reason that he isn't an idiot (any more so than must be expected among all members of the male gender). He has little patience for the foibles of society, and quite frankly, most of the time This Author cannot say she blames him.

And if that doesn't describe Viscount Bridgerton—surely this season's most eligible bachelor—to perfection, This Author shall retire Her quill immediately. The only question is: Will 1814 be the season he finally succumbs to the exquisite bliss of matrimony?

This Author Thinks . . .

Not.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 20 APRIL 1814

“Please don’t tell me,” Kate Sheffield said to the room at large, “that she is writing about Viscount Bridgerton again.”

Her half-sister Edwina, younger by almost four years, looked up from behind the single-sheet newspaper. “How could you tell?”

“You’re giggling like a madwoman.”

Edwina giggled, shaking the blue damask sofa on which they both sat.

“See?” Kate said, giving her a little poke in the arm. “You always giggle when she writes about some reprehensible rogue.” But Kate grinned. There was little she liked better than teasing her sister. In a good-natured manner, of course.

Mary Sheffield, Edwina’s mother, and Kate’s stepmother for nearly eighteen years, glanced up from her embroidery and pushed her spectacles farther up the bridge of her nose. “What are you two laughing about?”

“Kate’s in a snit because Lady Whistledown is writing about that rakish viscount again,” Edwina explained.

“I’m not in a snit,” Kate said, even though no one was listening.

“Bridgerton?” Mary asked absently.

Edwina nodded. “Yes.”

“She always writes about him.”

“I think she just likes writing about rakes,” Edwina commented.

“Of course she likes writing about rakes,” Kate retorted. “If she wrote about boring people, no one would buy her newspaper.”

“That’s not true,” Edwina replied. “Just last week she

wrote about us, and heaven knows we're not the most interesting people in London."

Kate smiled at her sister's naïveté. Kate and Mary might not be the most interesting people in London, but Edwina, with her buttery-colored hair and startlingly pale blue eyes, had already been named the Incomparable of 1814. Kate, on the other hand, with her plain brown hair and eyes, was usually referred to as "the Incomparable's older sister."

She supposed there were worse monikers. At least no one had yet begun to call her "the Incomparable's spinster sister." Which was a great deal closer to the truth than any of the Sheffields cared to admit. At twenty (nearly twenty-one, if one was going to be scrupulously honest about it), Kate was a bit long in the tooth to be enjoying her first season in London.

But there hadn't really been any other choice. The Sheffields hadn't been wealthy even when Kate's father had been alive, and since he'd passed on five years earlier, they'd been forced to economize even further. They certainly weren't ready for the poorhouse, but they had to mind every penny and watch every pound.

With their straitened finances, the Sheffields could manage the funds for only one trip to London. Renting a house—and a carriage—and hiring the bare minimum of servants for the season cost money. More money than they could afford to spend twice. As it was, they'd had to save for five solid years to be able to afford this trip to London. And if the girls weren't successful on the Marriage Mart . . . well, no one was going to clap them into debtor's prison, but they would have to look forward to a quiet life of genteel poverty at some charmingly small cottage in Somerset.

And so the two girls were forced to make their debuts in the same year. It had been decided that the most logical time would be when Edwina was just seventeen and Kate almost twenty-one. Mary would have liked to have waited

until Edwina was eighteen, and a bit more mature, but that would have made Kate nearly twenty-two, and heavens, but who would marry her then?

Kate smiled wryly. She hadn't even wanted a season. She'd known from the outset that she wasn't the sort who would capture the attention of the *ton*. She wasn't pretty enough to overcome her lack of dowry, and she'd never learned to simper and mince and walk delicately, and do all those things other girls seemed to know how to do in the cradle. Even Edwina, who didn't have a devious bone in her body, somehow knew how to stand and walk and sigh so that men came to blows just for the honor of helping her cross the street.

Kate, on the other hand, always stood with her shoulders straight and tall, couldn't sit still if her life depended upon it, and walked as if she were in a race—and why not? she always wondered. If one was going somewhere, what could possibly be the point in not getting there quickly?

As for her current season in London, she didn't even like the city very much. Oh, she was having a good enough time, and she'd met quite a few nice people, but a London season seemed a horrible waste of money to a girl who would have been perfectly content to remain in the country and find some sensible man to marry there.

But Mary would have none of that. "When I married your father," she'd said, "I vowed to love you and bring you up with all the care and affection I'd give to a child of my own blood."

Kate had managed to get in a single, "But—" before Mary carried on with, "I have a responsibility to your poor mother, God rest her soul, and part of that responsibility is to see you married off happily and securely."

"I could be happy and secure in the country," Kate had replied.

Mary had countered, "There are more men from which to choose in London."

After which Edwina had joined in, insisting that she

would be utterly miserable without her, and since Kate never could bear to see her sister unhappy, her fate had been sealed.

And so here she was—sitting in a somewhat faded drawing room in a rented house in a section of London that was almost fashionable, and . . .

She looked about mischievously.

. . . and she was about to snatch a newspaper from her sister's grasp.

"Kate!" Edwina squealed, her eyes bugging out at the tiny triangle of newsprint that remained between her right thumb and forefinger. "I wasn't done yet!"

"You've been reading it forever," Kate said with a cheeky grin. "Besides, I want to see what she has to say about Viscount Bridgerton today."

Edwina's eyes, which were usually compared to peaceful Scottish lochs, glinted devilishly. "You're awfully interested in the viscount, Kate. Is there something you're not telling us?"

"Don't be silly. I don't even know the man. And if I did, I would probably run in the opposite direction. He is exactly the sort of man the two of us should avoid at all costs. He could probably seduce an iceberg."

"Kate!" Mary exclaimed.

Kate grimaced. She'd forgotten her stepmother was listening. "Well, it's true," she added. "I've heard he's had more mistresses than I've had birthdays."

Mary looked at her for a few seconds, as if trying to decide whether or not she wanted to respond, and then finally she said, "Not that this is an appropriate topic for your ears, but many men have."

"Oh." Kate flushed. There was little less appealing than being decisively contradicted while one was trying to make a grand point. "Well, then, he's had twice as many. Whatever the case, he's far more promiscuous than most men, and not the sort Edwina ought to allow to court her."

"You are enjoying a season as well," Mary reminded her.

Kate shot Mary the most sarcastic of glances. They all knew that if the viscount chose to court a Sheffield, it would not be Kate.

"I don't think there is anything in there that's going to alter your opinion," Edwina said with a shrug as she leaned toward Kate to get a better view of the newspaper. "She doesn't say very much about *him*, actually. It's more of a treatise on the topic of rakes."

Kate's eyes swept over the typeset words. "Hmmpf," she said, her favorite expression of disdain. "I'll wager she's correct. He probably won't come up to scratch this year."

"You always think Lady Whistledown is correct," Mary murmured with a smile.

"She usually is," Kate replied. "You must admit, for a gossip columnist, she displays remarkable good sense. She has certainly been correct in her assessment of all the people I have met thus far in London."

"You should make your own judgments, Kate," Mary said lightly. "It is beneath you to base your opinions on a gossip column."

Kate knew her stepmother was right, but she didn't want to admit it, and so she just let out another "Hmmpf" and turned back to the paper in her hands.

Whistledown was, without a doubt, the most interesting reading material in all London. Kate wasn't entirely certain when the gossip column had begun—sometime the previous year, she'd heard—but one thing was certain. Whoever Lady Whistledown was (and no one *really* knew who she was), she was a well-connected member of the *ton*. She had to be. No interloper could ever uncover all the gossip she printed in her columns every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Lady Whistledown always had all the latest *on-dits*, and unlike other columnists, she wasn't hesitant about using people's full names. Having decided last week, for example, that Kate didn't look good in yellow, she wrote, clear

as day: "The color yellow makes the dark-haired Miss Katharine Sheffield look like a singed daffodil."

Kate hadn't minded the insult. She'd heard it said on more than one occasion that one could not consider oneself "arrived" until one had been insulted by Lady Whistledown. Even Edwina, who was a huge social success by anyone's measure, had been jealous that Kate had been singled out for an insult.

And even though Kate didn't particularly want to be in London for a season, she figured that if she had to participate in the social whirl, she might as well not be a complete and utter failure. If getting insulted in a gossip column was to be her only sign of success, well then, so be it. Kate would take her triumphs where she may.

Now when Penelope Featherington bragged about being likened to an overripe citrus fruit in her tangerine satin, Kate could wave her arm and sigh with great drama, "Yes, well, I am a singed daffodil."

"Someday," Mary announced out of the blue, giving her spectacles yet another push with her index finger, "someone is going to discover that woman's true identity, and then she's going to be in trouble."

Edwina looked at her mother with interest. "Do you really think someone will ferret her out? She has managed to keep her secret for over a year now."

"Nothing that big can stay a secret forever," Mary replied. She jabbed her embroidery with her needle, pulling a long strand of yellow thread through the fabric. "Mark my words. It's all going to come out sooner or later, and when it does, a scandal the likes of which you have never seen is going to erupt all over town."

"Well, if I knew who she was," Kate announced, flipping the single-sheet newspaper over to page two, "I'd probably make her my best friend. She's fiendishly entertaining. And no matter what anyone says, she's almost always right."

Just then, Newton, Kate's somewhat overweight corgi, trotted into the room.

"Isn't that dog supposed to stay outside?" Mary asked. Then she yelped, "Kate!" as the dog angled over to her feet and panted as if waiting for a kiss.

"Newton, come here this minute," Kate ordered.

The dog gazed longingly at Mary, then waddled over to Kate, hopped up onto the sofa, and laid his front paws across her lap.

"He's covering you with fur," Edwina said.

Kate shrugged as she stroked his thick, caramel-colored coat. "I don't mind."

Edwina sighed, but she reached out and gave Newton a quick pat, anyway. "What else does she say?" she asked, leaning forward with interest. "I never did get to see page two."

Kate smiled at her sister's sarcasm. "Not much. A little something about the Duke and Duchess of Hastings, who apparently arrived in town earlier this week, a list of the food at Lady Danbury's ball, which she proclaimed 'surprisingly delicious,' and a rather unfortunate description of Mrs. Featherington's gown Monday last."

Edwina frowned. "She does seem to pick on the Featheringtons quite a bit."

"And no wonder," Mary said, setting down her embroidery as she stood up. "That woman wouldn't know how to pick out a dress color for her girls if a rainbow wrapped itself right around her neck."

"Mother!" Edwina exclaimed.

Kate clapped a hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh. Mary rarely made such opinionated pronouncements, but when she did, they were always marvelous.

"Well, it's true. She keeps dressing her youngest in tangerine. Anyone can see that poor girl needs a blue or a mint green."

"You dressed me in yellow," Kate reminded her.

"And I'm sorry I did. That will teach me to listen to a shopgirl. I should never have doubted my own judgment. We'll simply have to have that one cut down for Edwina."