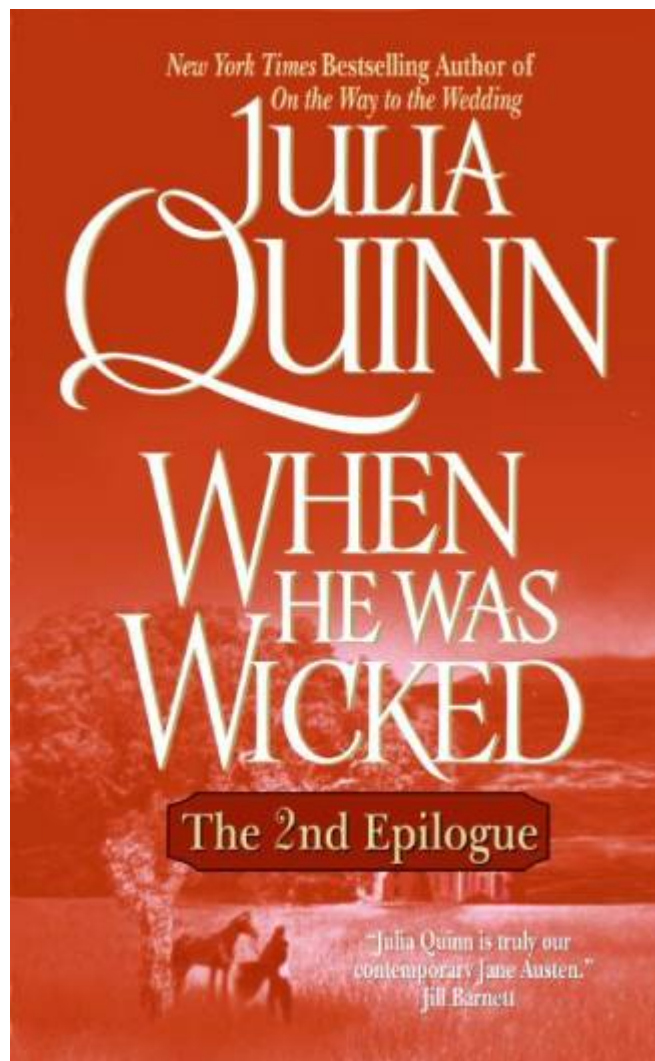




JULIA QUINN
WHEN HE WAS WICKED

Epilogue II

 HarperCollins e-books

Contents

Begin Reading
Can't get enough Julia Quinn?
About the Author
Cover
Copyright
About the Publisher

She was counting again.
Counting, always counting.
Seven days since her last menses.
Six until she might be fertile.
Twenty-four to thirty-one until she might expect to bleed again, provided she didn't conceive.
Which she probably wouldn't.
It had been three years since she'd married Michael. Three years. She'd suffered through her courses thirty-three times. She'd counted them, of course; made depressing little hatch marks on a piece of paper she kept tucked away in her desk, in the far back corner of the middle drawer, where Michael wouldn't see.
It would pain him. Not because he wanted a child, which he did, but rather because she wanted one so desperately.
And he wanted it for her. Maybe even more than he wanted one himself.
She tried to hide her sorrow. She tried to smile at the breakfast table and pretend that it didn't matter that she'd a wad of cloth between her legs, but Michael always saw it in her eyes, and he seemed to hold her closer through the day, kiss her brow more often.
She tried to tell herself that she should count her blessings. And she did. Oh, how she did. Every day. She was Francesca Bridgerton Stirling, Countess of Kilmartin, blessed with two loving families—the one she'd been born into and the one she'd acquired—twice—through marriage.
She had a husband most women only dreamed of. Handsome, funny, intelligent, and as desperately in love with her as she was with him. Michael made her laugh. He made her days a joy and her nights an adventure. She loved to talk with him, to walk with him, to simply sit in the same room with him and steal glances while they were each pretending to read a book.
She was happy. Truly, she was. And if she never had a baby, at least she had this man—this wonderful, marvelous, miraculous man who understood her in a way that left her breathless.
He knew her. He knew every inch of her, and still, he never ceased to amaze and challenge her.
She loved him. With every breath in her body, she loved him.
And most of the time, it was enough. Most of the time, it was more than enough.
But late at night, after he'd fallen asleep, and she still lay awake, curled up against him, she felt an emptiness that she feared neither of them could ever fill. She would touch her abdomen, and there it was, flat as always, mocking her with its refusal to do the one thing she wanted more than anything else.
And that was when she cried.

There had to be a name for it, Michael thought as he stood at his window, watching Francesca disappear over the hillside toward the Kilmartin family plot. There had to be a name for this particular brand of pain, of torture, really. All he wanted in the world was to make her happy. Oh, for certain there were other things—peace, health, prosperity for his tenants, right-minded men in the seat of Prime Minister for the next hundred years. But when all was said and done, what he wanted was Francesca's happiness.
He loved her. He always had. It was, or at least it should have been, the most uncomplicated thing in the world. He loved her. Period. And he would have moved heaven and earth, if it were only in his power, to make her happy.
Except the one thing she wanted most of all, the one thing she craved so desperately and fought so valiantly to hide her pain about, he could not seem to give her.
A child.
And the funny thing was, he was beginning to feel the same pain.

At first, he had felt it just for her. She wanted a child, and therefore he wanted one as well. She wanted to be a mother, and therefore he wanted her to be one. He wanted to see her holding a child, not because it would be his child, but because it would be hers.

He wanted her to have what she desired. And selfishly, he wanted to be the man to give it to her. But lately, he'd felt the pangs himself. They would visit one of her many brothers or sisters and be immediately surrounded by the next generation of offspring. They would tug on his leg, shriek, "Uncle Michael!" and howl with laughter when he would toss them in the air, always begging for one more minute, one more twirl, one more secret peppermint candy.

The Bridgertons were marvelously fertile. They all seemed to produce exactly the number of offspring they desired. And then perhaps one more, just for good measure.

Except Francesca.

Five hundred and eighty-four days after her thirty-third menses, Francesca stepped out of the Kilmartin carriage and breathed the fresh, clean air of the Kent countryside. Spring was well under way, and the sun was warm on her cheeks, but when the wind blew, it carried with it the last hints of winter. Francesca didn't mind, though. She'd always liked the tingle of a cold wind on her skin. It drove Michael mad—he was always complaining that he'd never quite readjusted to life in a cold climate after so many years in India.

She was sorry he had not been able to accompany her on the long ride down from Scotland for the christening of Hyacinth's baby daughter Isabella. He would be there, of course; she and Michael never missed the christening of any of their nieces and nephews. But affairs in Edinburgh had delayed his arrival. Francesca could have delayed her trip as well, but it had been many months since she had seen her family, and she missed them.

It was funny. When she was younger, she'd always been so eager to get away, to set up her own household, her own identity. But now, as she watched her nieces and nephews grow, she'd found herself visiting more often. She didn't want to miss the milestones. She had just happened to be visiting when Colin's daughter Agatha had taken her first steps. It had been breathtaking. And although she had wept quietly in her bed that night, the tears in her eyes as she'd watched Aggie lurch forward and laugh had been ones of pure joy.

If she wasn't going to be a mother, then by God, at least she would have those moments. She couldn't bear to think of life without them.

Francesca smiled as she handed her cloak to a footman and walked down the familiar corridors of Aubrey Hall. She'd spent much of her childhood here, and at Bridgerton House in London. Anthony and his wife had made some changes, but much was still just as it had always been. The walls were still painted the same creamy white, with the barest undertone of peach. And the Fragonard her father had bought her mother for her thirtieth birthday still hung over the table just outside the door to the rose salon. "Francesca!"

She turned. It was her mother, rising from her seat in the salon.

"How long have you been standing out there?" Violet asked, coming to greet her.

Francesca embraced her mother. "Not long. I was admiring the painting."

Violet stood beside her and together they regarded the Fragonard. "It's marvelous, isn't it?" she murmured, a soft, wistful smile touching her face.

"I love it," Francesca said. "I always have. It makes me think of Father."

Violet turned to her in surprise. "It does?"

Francesca could understand her reaction. The painting was of a young woman holding a bouquet of flowers with a note attached. Not a very masculine subject. But she was looking over her shoulder, and her expression was a little bit mischievous, as if, given the correct provocation, she might laugh.

Francesca could not remember much of her parents' relationship; she had been but six at the time of her father's death. But she remembered the laughter. The sound of her father's deep, rich chuckle—it lived within her.

"I think your marriage must have been like that," Francesca said, motioning to the painting.

Violet took a half step back and cocked her head to the side. "I think you're right," she said, looking rather delighted by the realization. "I never thought of it quite that way."

"You should take the painting back with you to London," Francesca said. "It's yours, isn't it?"

Violet blushed, and for a brief moment, Francesca saw the young girl she must have been shining out from her eyes. "Yes," she said, "but it belongs here. This was where he gave it to me. And this"—she motioned to its spot of honor on the wall—"was where we hung it together."

"You were very happy," Francesca said. It wasn't a question, just an observation.

"As are you."

Francesca nodded.

Violet reached out and took her hand, patting it gently as they both continued to study the painting.

Francesca knew exactly what her mother was thinking about—her infertility, and the fact that they seemed to have an unspoken agreement never to talk about it, and really, why should they? What could Violet possibly say that would make it better?

Francesca couldn't say anything, because that would just make her mother feel even worse, and so instead they stood there as they always did, thinking the same thing but never speaking of it, wondering which of them hurt more.

Francesca thought it might be her—hers was the barren womb, after all. But maybe her mother's pain was more acute. Violet was...her mother, and she was grieving for the lost dreams of her child.

Wouldn't that be painful? And the irony was, Francesca would never know. She'd never know what it felt like to hurt for a child because she'd never know what it was to be a mother.

She was almost two-and-thirty. She did not know any married lady who had reached that age without conceiving a child. It seemed that children either arrived right away or not at all.

"Has Hyacinth arrived?" Francesca asked, still looking at the painting, still staring at the twinkle in the woman's eye.

"Not yet. But Eloise will be here later this afternoon. She—"

But Francesca heard the catch in her mother's voice before she'd cut herself off. "Is she expecting, then?" she asked.

There was a beat of silence, and then: "Yes."

"That's wonderful." And she meant it. She did, with every last bit of her being. She just didn't know how to make it sound that way.

She didn't want to look at her mother's face. Because then she would cry.

Francesca cleared her throat, tilting her head to the side as if there were an inch of the Fragonard she hadn't yet perused. "Anyone else?" she queried.

She felt her mother stiffen slightly beside her, and she wondered if Violet was deciding whether it was worth it to pretend that she didn't know exactly what she meant.

"Lucy," her mother said quietly.

Francesca finally turned and faced Violet, pulling her hand out of her mother's grasp. "Again?" she asked. Lucy and Gregory had been married for less than two years, but this would be their second child. Violet nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't say that," Francesca said, horrified by how thick her voice sounded. "Don't say you're sorry. It's not something to be sorry about."

"No," her mother said quickly. "That wasn't what I meant."

"You should be delighted for them."

"I am!"

"More delighted for them than you are sorry for me," Francesca choked out.

"Francesca..."

Violet tried to reach for her, but Francesca pulled away. "Promise me," she said. "You have to promise me that you will always be more happy than you are sorry."

Violet looked at her helplessly, and Francesca realized that her mother did not know what to say. For her entire life, Violet Bridgerton had been the most sensitive and wonderful of mothers. She always seemed to know what her children needed, exactly when they needed it—whether it was a kind word or

a gentle prod, or even a giant proverbial kick in the breeches.

But now, in this moment, Violet was lost. And Francesca was the one who had done it to her.

"I'm sorry, Mother," she said, the words spilling out. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

"No." Violet rushed forward to embrace her, and this time Francesca did not pull away. "No, darling,"

Violet said again, softly stroking her hair. "Don't say that, please don't say that."

She shushed and she crooned, and Francesca let her mother hold her. And when Francesca's hot, silent tears fell on her mother's shoulder, neither one of them said a word.

By the time Michael arrived two days later, Francesca had thrown herself into the preparations for little Isabella's christening, and her conversation with her mother was, if not forgotten, at least not at the forefront of her mind. It wasn't as if any of this was new, after all. Francesca was just as barren as she'd been every time she came to England to see her family. The only difference this time was that she'd actually talked to someone about it. A little bit.

As much as she was able.

And yet, somehow, something had been lifted from her. When she'd stood there in the hall, her mother's arms around her, something had poured out from her along with her tears.

And while she still grieved for the babies she would never have, for the first time in a long time, she felt unreservedly happy.

It was strange and wonderful, and she positively refused to question it.

"Aunt Francesca! Aunt Francesca!"

Francesca smiled as she looped her arm through that of her niece. Charlotte was Anthony's youngest, due to turn eight in a month's time. "What is it, poppet?"

"Did you see the baby's dress? It's so long."

"I know."

"And frilly."

"Christening dresses are meant to be frilly. Even the boys are covered in lace."

"It seems a waste," Charlotte said with a shrug. "Isabella doesn't know she's wearing anything so pretty."

"Ah, but we do."

Charlotte pondered this for a moment. "But I don't care, do you?"

Francesca chuckled. "No, I don't suppose I do. I should love her no matter what she was wearing."

The two of them continued their stroll through the gardens, picking the grape hyacinths to decorate the chapel. They had nearly filled the basket when they heard the unmistakable sound of a carriage coming down the drive.

"I wonder who it is now," Charlotte said, rising to her toes as if that might actually help her see the carriage any better.

"I'm not sure," Francesca replied. Any number of relations were due that afternoon.

"Uncle Michael, maybe."

Francesca smiled. "I hope so."

"I adore Uncle Michael," Charlotte said with a sigh, and Francesca almost laughed, because the look in her niece's eye was one she'd seen a thousand times before.

Women adored Michael. It seemed even seven-year-old girls were not immune to his charm.

"Well, he is very handsome," Francesca demurred.

Charlotte shrugged. "I suppose."

"You suppose?" Francesca replied, trying very hard not to smile.

"I like him because he tosses me in the air when Father isn't looking."

"He does like to bend the rules."

Charlotte grinned. "I know. It's why I don't tell Father."

Francesca had never thought of Anthony as particularly stern, but he had been the head of the family for over twenty years, and she supposed the experience had endowed him with a certain love of order and tidiness.

And it had to be said—he did like to be in charge.

“It shall be our secret,” Francesca said, leaning down to whisper in her niece’s ear. “And anytime you wish to come visit us in Scotland, you may. We bend rules all the time.”

Charlotte’s eyes grew huge. “You do?”

“Sometimes we have breakfast for supper.”

“Brilliant.”

“And we walk in the rain.”

Charlotte shrugged. “Everybody walks in the rain.”

“Yes, I suppose, but sometimes we dance.”

Charlotte stepped back. “May I go back with you now?”

“That’s up to your parents, poppet.” Francesca laughed and reached for Charlotte’s hand. “But we can dance right now.”

“Here?”

Francesca nodded.

“Where everyone can see?”

Francesca looked around. “I don’t see anyone watching. And even if there were, who cares?”

Charlotte’s lips pursed, and Francesca could practically see her mind at work. “Not me!” she announced, and she linked her arm through Francesca’s. Together they did a little jig, followed by a Scottish reel, twisting and twirling until they were both breathless.

“Oh, I wish it would rain!” Charlotte laughed.

“Now what would be the fun in that?”

“Uncle Michael!” Charlotte shrieked, launching herself at him.

“And I am instantly forgotten,” Francesca said with a wry smile.

Michael looked at her warmly over Charlotte’s head. “Not by me,” he murmured.

“Aunt Francesca and I have been dancing,” Charlotte told him.

“I know. I saw you from inside the house. I especially enjoyed the new one.”

“What new one?”

Michael pretended to look confused. “The new dance you were doing.”

“We weren’t doing any new dances,” Charlotte replied, her brows knitting together.

“Then what was that one that involved throwing yourself on the grass?”

Francesca bit her lip to keep from smiling.

“We fell, Uncle Michael.”

“No!”

“We did!”

“It was a vigorous dance,” Francesca confirmed.

“You must be exceptionally graceful, then, because it looked completely as if you’d done it on purpose.”

“We didn’t! We didn’t!” Charlotte said excitedly. “We really did just fall. By accident!”

“I suppose I will believe you,” he said with a sigh, “but only because I know you are far too trustworthy to lie.”

She looked him in the eye with a melting expression. “I would never lie to you, Uncle Michael,” she said. He kissed her cheek and set her down. “Your mother says it’s time for dinner.”

“But you just got here!”

“I’m not going anywhere. You need your sustenance after all the dancing.”

“I’m not hungry,” she offered.

“Pity, then,” he said, “because I was going to teach you to waltz this afternoon, and you certainly cannot do that on an empty stomach.”

Charlotte’s eyes grew to near circles. “Really? Father said I cannot learn until I am ten.”

Michael gave her one of those devastating half smiles that still made Francesca tingle. “We don’t have to tell him, do we?”

“Oh, Uncle Michael, I love you,” she said fervently, then, after one extremely vigorous hug, Charlotte ran off to Aubrey Hall.

"And another one falls," Francesca said with a shake of her head, watching her niece dash across the fields.

Michael took her hand and tugged her toward him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Francesca grinned a little and sighed a little, and said, "I would never lie to you."

He kissed her soundly. "I certainly hope not."

She looked up into his silvery eyes and let herself ease against the warmth of his body. "It seems no woman is immune."

"How lucky I am, then, that I fall under the spell of only one."

"Lucky for me."

"Well, yes," he said with affected modesty, "but I wasn't going to say it."

She swatted him on the arm.

He kissed her in return. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

"And how is the clan Bridgerton?" he asked, linking his arm through hers.

"Rather wonderful," Francesca replied. "I am having a splendid time, actually."

"Actually?" he echoed, looking vaguely amused.

Francesca steered him away from the house. It had been over a week since she'd had his company, and she didn't wish to share him just then. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"You said 'actually.' As if you were surprised."

"Of course not," she said. But then she thought. "I always have a lovely time when I visit my family," she said carefully.

"But..."

"But it's better this time." She shrugged. "I don't know why."

Which wasn't precisely the truth. That moment with her mother—there had been magic in those tears.

But she couldn't tell him that. He'd hear the bit about crying and nothing else, and then he'd worry, and she'd feel terrible for worrying him, and she was tired of all that.

Besides, he was a man. He'd never understand, anyway.

"I feel happy," she announced. "Something in the air."

"The sun is shining," he observed.

She gave him a jaunty, single-shouldered shrug and leaned back against a tree. "Birds are singing."

"Flowers blooming?"

"Just a few," she admitted.

He regarded the landscape. "All the moment needs is a cherubic little bunny hopping across the field."

She smiled blissfully and leaned into him for a kiss. "Bucolic splendor is a marvelous thing."

"Indeed." His lips found hers with familiar hunger. "I missed you," he said, his voice husky with desire.

She let out a little moan as he nipped her ear. "I know. You said that."

"It bears repeating."

Francesca meant to say something witty about never tiring of hearing it, but at that moment she found herself pressed rather breathlessly against the tree, one of her legs lifted around his hips.

"You wear far too many clothes," he growled.

"We're a little too close to the house," she gasped, her belly clenching with need as he pressed more intimately against her.

"How far," he murmured, one of his hands stealing under her skirts, "is not 'too close'?"

"Not far."

He drew back and gazed at her. "Really?"

"Really." Her lips curved, and she felt devilish. She felt powerful. And she wanted to take charge. Of him. Of her life. Of everything.

"Come with me," she said impulsively, and she grabbed his hand and ran.

Michael had missed his wife. At night, when she was not beside him, the bed felt cold, and the air felt empty. Even when he was tired, and his body was not hungry for her, he craved her presence, her scent, her warmth.

He missed the sound of her breathing. He missed the way the mattress moved differently when there was a second body on it.

He knew, even though she was more reticent than he, and far less likely to use such passionate words, that she felt the same way. But even so, he was pleasantly surprised to be racing across a field, letting her take the lead, knowing that in a few short minutes he would be buried deep within her.

"Here," she said, skidding to a halt at the bottom of a hill.

"Here?" he asked dubiously. There was no cover of trees, nothing to block them from sight should anyone stroll by.

She sat. "No one comes this way."

"No one?"

"The grass is very soft," she said seductively, patting a spot beside her.

"I'm not even going to ask how you know that," he muttered.

"Picnics," she said, her expression delightfully outraged, "with my dolls."

He took off his coat and laid it like a blanket on the grass. The ground was softly sloped, which he would imagine would be more comfortable for her than horizontal.

He looked at her. He looked at the coat. She didn't move.

"You," she said.

"Me?"

"Lie down," she ordered.

He did. With alacrity.

And then, before he'd had time to make a comment, to tease or cajole, or even really to breathe, she'd straddled him.

"Oh, dear G—" he gasped, but he couldn't finish. She was kissing him now, her mouth hot and hungry and aggressive. It was all deliciously familiar—he loved knowing every little bit of her, from the slope of her breast to the rhythm of her kisses—and yet this time, she felt a little...

New.

Renewed.

One of his hands moved to the back of her head. At home he liked to pull the pins out one by one, watching each lock tumble from her coiffure. But today he was too needy, too urgent, and he didn't have patience for—

"What was that for?" he asked. She had yanked his hand away.

Her eyes narrowed languidly. "I'm in charge," she whispered.

His body tightened. More. Dear God, she was going to kill him.

"Don't go slow," he gasped.

But he didn't think she was listening. She was taking her time, undoing his breeches, letting her hands flutter along his belly until she found him.

"Frannie..."

One finger. That's all she gave him. One featherlight finger along his shaft.

She turned, looked at him. "This is fun," she remarked.

He just focused on trying to breathe.

"I love you," she said softly, and he felt her rise. She hoisted her skirts to her thighs as she positioned herself, then, with one spectacularly swift stroke, she took him within her, her body coming to rest against his, leaving him embedded to the hilt.

He wanted to move then. He wanted to thrust up, or flip her over and pound until they were both nothing but dust, but her hands were firm on his hips, and when he looked up at her, her eyes were closed, and she almost looked as if she were concentrating.

Her breathing was slow and steady, but it was loud, too, and with each exhale she seemed to bear down on him just a little bit more heavily.

"Frannie," he groaned, because he didn't know what else to do. He wanted her to move faster. Or harder. Or something, but all she did was rock back and forth, her hips arching and curving in delicious torment. He clutched her hips, intending to move her up and down, but she opened her eyes and shook her head with a soft, blissful smile.

"I like it this way," she said.

He wanted something different. He needed something different, but when she looked down at him, she looked so damned happy that he could deny her nothing. And then, sure enough, she began to shudder, and it was strange, because he knew the feel of her climax so well, and yet this time it seemed softer...and stronger, at the same time.

She swayed, and she rocked, then she let out a little scream and sagged against him.

And, to his utter and complete surprise, he came. He hadn't thought he was ready. He hadn't thought he was remotely near climax, not that it would have taken long had he been able to move beneath her. But then, without warning, he had simply exploded.

They lay that way for some time, the sun falling gently on them. She burrowed her face in his neck, and he held her, wondering how it was possible that such moments existed.

Because it was perfect. And he would have stayed there forever had he been able. And even though he didn't ask her, he knew she felt the same.

They'd meant to go home two days after the christening, Francesca thought as she watched one of her nephews tackle the other to the ground, but here it was, three weeks out, and they had not even begun to pack.

"No broken bones, I hope."

Francesca smiled up at her sister Eloise, who had also elected to stay on at Aubrey Hall for an extended visit. "No," she answered, wincing slightly when the future Duke of Hastings—otherwise known as Davey, aged eleven—let out a war whoop as he jumped from a tree. "But it's not for lack of trying."

Eloise took a seat beside her and tilted her face to the sun. "I'll put my bonnet on in a minute, I swear it," she said.

"I can't quite determine the rules of the game," Francesca remarked.

Eloise didn't bother to open her eyes. "That's because there are none."

Francesca watched the chaos with fresh perspective. Oliver, Eloise's twelve-year-old stepson, had grabbed hold of a ball—since when had there been a ball?—and was racing across the lawn. He appeared to reach his goal—not that Francesca would ever be sure whether that was the giant oak stump that had been there since she was a child or Miles, Anthony's second son, who had been sitting cross-legged and cross-armed since Francesca had come outside ten minutes earlier.

But whichever was the case, Oliver must have won a point because he slammed the ball against the ground and jumped up and down with a triumphant cry. Miles must have been on his team—this was the first indication Francesca had that there were teams—because he hopped to his feet and celebrated in kind.

Eloise opened one eye. "My child didn't kill anyone, did he?"

"No."

"No one killed him?"

Francesca smiled. "No."

"Good." Eloise yawned and resettled into her chaise.

Francesca thought about her words. "Eloise?"

"Mmmm?"

"Do you ever..." She frowned. There really wasn't any right way to ask this. "Do you ever love Oliver and Amanda..."

"Less?" Eloise supplied.

"Yes."

Eloise sat up straighter and opened her eyes. "No."

"Really?" It wasn't that Francesca didn't believe her. She loved her nieces and nephews with every

breath in her body; she would have laid down her life for any one of them—Oliver and Amanda included—without even a moment's hesitation. But she hadn't ever given birth. She had never carried a child in her womb—not for long, anyway—and didn't know if somehow that made it different. Made it more.

If she had a baby, one of her own, born of her blood and Michael's, would she suddenly realize that this love she felt now for Charlotte and Oliver and Miles and all the others—Would it suddenly feel like a wisp next to what was in her heart for her own child?

Did it make a difference?

Did she want it to make a difference?

"I thought it would," Eloise admitted. "Of course I loved Oliver and Amanda long before I had Penelope. How could I not? They are pieces of Phillip. And," she continued, her face growing thoughtful, as if she had never quite delved into this before, "they are...themselves. And I am their mother."

Francesca smiled wistfully.

"But even so," Eloise continued, "before I had Penelope, and even when I was carrying her, I thought it would be different." She paused. "It is different." She paused again. "But it's not less. It's not a question of levels or amounts, or even...really...the nature of it."

Eloise shrugged. "I can't explain it."

Francesca looked back to the game, which had resumed with new intensity. "No," she said softly, "I think you did."

There was a long silence, then Eloise said, "You don't...talk about it much."

Francesca shook her head gently. "No."

"Do you want to?"

She thought about that for a moment. "I don't know." She turned to her sister. They had been at sixes and sevens for much of their childhood, but in so many ways Eloise was like the other half of her coin. They looked so alike, save for the color of their eyes, and they even shared the same birthday, just one year apart.

Eloise was watching her with a tender curiosity, a sympathy that, just a few weeks ago, would have been heartbreaking. But now it was simply comforting. Francesca didn't feel pitied, she felt loved.

"I'm happy," Francesca said. And she was. She really was. For once she didn't feel that aching emptiness hiding underneath. She'd even forgotten to count. She didn't know how many days it had been since her last menses, and it felt so bloody good.

"I hate numbers," she muttered.

"I beg your pardon?"

She bit back a smile. "Nothing."

The sun, which had been obscured behind a thin layer of cloud, suddenly popped into the open. Eloise shaded her eyes with her hand as she sat back. "Good heavens," she remarked. "I think Oliver just sat on Miles."

Francesca laughed, then, before she even knew what she was about, stood. "Do you think they'll let me play?"

Eloise looked at her as if she'd gone mad, which, Francesca thought with a shrug, perhaps she had.

Eloise looked at Francesca, then at the boys, and finally back at Francesca. And then she stood. "If you do it, I'll do it."

"You can't do it," Francesca said. "You're pregnant."

"Barely," Eloise said with a scoff. "Besides, Oliver wouldn't dare sit on me." She held out her arm. "Shall we?"

"I believe we shall." Francesca linked her arm through her sister's, and together they ran down the hill, shouting like banshees and loving every minute of it.

"I heard you made quite a scene this afternoon," Michael said, perching on the edge of the bed.

Francesca did not move. Not even an eyelid. "I'm exhausted," was all she said.

He took in the dusty hem of her dress. "And dirty, too."

"Too tired to wash."

"Anthony said that Miles said that he was quite impressed. Apparently you throw quite well for a girl."

"It would have been brilliant," she replied, "had I been informed that I wasn't meant to use my hands."

He chuckled. "What game, exactly, were you playing?"

"I have no idea." She let out an exhausted little moan. "Would you rub my feet?"

He pushed himself farther onto the bed and slid her dress up to midcalf. Her feet were filthy. "Good lord," he exclaimed. "Did you go barefoot?"

"I couldn't very well play in my slippers."

"How did Eloise fare?"

"She, apparently, throws like a boy."

"I thought you weren't meant to use your hands."

At that, she pushed herself indignantly up on her elbows. "I know. It depended on what end of the field one was at. Whoever heard of such a thing."

He took her foot in his hands, making a mental note to wash them later—his hands that was, she could take care of her own feet. "I had no idea you were so competitive," he remarked.

"It runs in the family," she mumbled. "No, no, there. Yes, right there. Harder. Oooooohhhh..."

"Why do I feel as if I heard this before," he mused, "except that I was having much more fun?"

"Just be quiet and keep rubbing my feet."

"At your service, your majesty," he murmured, smiling when he realized she was perfectly content to be referred to as such. After a minute or two of silence, save for the occasional moan from Francesca, he asked, "How much longer do you wish to stay?"

"Are you eager to return home?"

"I do have matters to attend to," he replied, "but nothing that cannot wait. I'm rather enjoying your family, actually."

She quirked a brow—and a smile. "Actually?"

"Indeed. Although it was a bit daunting when your sister beat me at the shooting match."

"She beats everyone. She always has. Shoot with Gregory next time. He can't hit a tree."

Michael moved on to the other foot. Francesca looked so happy and relaxed. Not just now, but at the supper table, and in the drawing room, and when she was chasing her nieces and nephews, and even at night, when he was making love to her in their huge four-poster bed. He was ready to go home, back to Kilmartin, which was ancient and drafty but indelibly theirs. But he'd happily remain here forever if it meant Francesca would always look like this.

"I think you're right," she said.

"Of course," he replied, "but about what, exactly?"

"It's time to go home."

"I didn't say that it was. I merely inquired as to your intentions."

"You didn't have to say it," she said.

"If you want to stay—"

She shook her head. "I don't. I want to go home. Our home." With a stiff groan, she sat up all the way, curling her legs beneath her. "This has been lovely, and I have had such a wonderful time, but I miss Kilmartin."

"Are you certain?"

"I miss you."

He lifted his brows. "I'm right here."

She smiled and leaned forward. "I miss having you to myself."

"You need only say the word, my lady. Anytime, anywhere. I'll whisk you off and let you have your way with me."

She chuckled. "Perhaps right now."

He thought that was an excellent idea, but chivalry forced him to say, "I thought you were sore."

"Not that sore. Not if you do all the work."

"That, my dear, is not a problem." He pulled his shirt over his head and lay down beside her, giving her a

long, delicious kiss. He pulled back with a contented sigh, then just gazed at her. "You're beautiful," he whispered. "More than ever."

She smiled—that lazy, warm smile that meant she'd been recently pleased, or knew she was about to be.

He loved that smile.

He went to work on the buttons at the back of her frock and was halfway down when all of a sudden a thought popped into his head. "Wait," he said. "Can you?"

"Can I what?"

He stopped, frowning as he tried to count it out in his head. Oughtn't she be bleeding? "Isn't it your time?" he asked.

Her lips parted, and she blinked. "No," she said, sounding a little bit startled—not by his question but by her answer. "No, I'm not."

He shifted position, moving back a few inches so that he could better see her face. "Do you think...?"

"I don't know." She was blinking rapidly now, and he could hear that her breathing had grown more rapid. "I suppose. I could..."

He wanted to whoop with joy, but he dare not. Not yet. "When do you think—"

"—I'll know? I don't know. Maybe—"

"—in a month? Two?"

"Maybe two. Maybe sooner. I don't know." Her hand flew to her belly. "It might not take."

"It might not," he said carefully.

"But it might."

"It might."

He felt laughter bubbling within him, a strange giddiness in his belly, growing and tickling until it burst from his lips.

"We can't be sure," she warned, but he could see that she was excited, too.

"No," he said, but somehow he knew they were.

"I don't want to get my hopes up."

"No, no, of course we mustn't."

Her eyes grew wide, and she placed both hands on her belly, still absolutely, completely flat.

"Do you feel anything?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "It would be too early, anyway."

He knew that. He knew that he knew that. He didn't know why he'd asked.

And then Francesca said the damndest thing. "But he's there," she whispered. "I know it."

"Frannie..." If she was wrong, if her heart was broken again—he just didn't think he could bear it.

But she was shaking her head. "It's true," she said, and she wasn't insisting. She wasn't trying to convince him, or even herself. He could hear it in her voice. Somehow she knew.

"Have you been feeling ill?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Have you—Good God, you shouldn't have been playing with the boys this afternoon."

"Eloise did."

"Eloise can do what she damn well pleases. She isn't you."

She smiled. Like a Madonna, she smiled, he would have sworn it. And she said, "I won't break."

He remembered when she'd miscarried years ago. It had not been his child, but he had felt her pain, hot and searing, like a fist around his heart. His cousin—her first husband—had been dead a scant few weeks, and they were both reeling from that loss. When she'd lost John's baby...

He didn't think either one of them could survive another loss like that.

"Francesca," he said urgently, "you must take care. Please."

"It won't happen again," she said, shaking her head.

"How do you know?"

She gave him a bewildered shrug. "I don't know. I just do."

Dear God, he prayed she was not deluding herself. "Do you want to tell your family?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. "Not yet. Not because I have any fears," she hastened to add. "I just want—" Her lips pressed together in the most adorably giddy little smile. "I just want it to be mine for a little while. Ours."

He brought her hand to his lips. "How long is a little while?"

"I'm not sure." But her eyes were growing crafty. "I'm not quite sure..."

One year later...

Violet Bridgerton loved all her children equally, but she loved them differently as well. And when it came to missing them, she did so in what she considered a most logical manner. Her heart pined the most for the one she'd seen the least. And that was why, as she waited in the drawing room at Aubrey Hall, watching for a carriage bearing the Kilmartin crest to roll down the drive, she found herself fidgety and eager, jumping up every five minutes to watch through the window.

"She wrote that they would arrive today," Kate reassured her.

"I know," Violet replied with a sheepish smile. "It's just that I haven't seen her for an entire year. I know Scotland is far, but I've never gone an entire year without seeing one of my children before."

"Really?" Kate asked. "That's remarkable."

"We all have our priorities," Violet said, deciding there was no point in trying to pretend she wasn't champing at the bit. She set down her embroidery and moved to the window, craning her neck when she thought she saw something glinting in the sunlight.

"Even when Colin was traveling so much?" Kate asked.

"The longest he was gone was 342 days," Violet replied. "When he was traveling in the Mediterranean." "You counted?"

Violet shrugged. "I can't help myself. I like to count." She thought of all the counting she'd done when her children were growing up, making sure she had as many offspring at the end of an outing as she'd had at the beginning. "It helps to keep track of things."

Kate smiled as she reached down and rocked the cradle at her feet. "I shall never complain about the logistics of managing four."

Violet crossed the room to peek down at her newest grandchild. Little Mary had been a bit of a surprise, coming so many years after Charlotte. Kate had thought herself done with childbearing, but then, ten months earlier, she'd got out of bed, walked calmly to the chamber pot, emptied the contents of her stomach, and announced to Anthony, "I believe we're expecting again."

Or so they'd told Violet. She made it a point to stay out of her grown children's bedrooms except in the case of illness or childbirth.

"I never complained," Violet said softly. Kate didn't hear, but Violet hadn't meant her to. She smiled down at Mary, sleeping sweetly under a purple blanket. "I think your mother would have been delighted," she said, looking up at Kate.

Kate nodded, her eyes misting over. Her mother—actually her stepmother, but Mary Sheffield had raised her from a little girl—had passed away a month before Kate realized that she was pregnant. "I know it makes no sense," Kate said, leaning down to examine her child's face more closely, "but I would swear she looks a bit like her."

Violet blinked and tilted her head to the side. "I think you're right."

"Something about the eyes."

"No, it's the nose."

"Do you think? I rather thought—Oh look!" Kate pointed toward the window. "Is that Francesca?"

Violet straightened and rushed to the window. "It is!" she exclaimed. "Oh, and the sun is shining. I'm going to wait outside."

With nary a backward glance she grabbed her shawl off a side table and dashed into the hall. It had been so long since she'd seen Frannie, but that wasn't the only reason she was so eager to see her. Francesca

had changed during her last visit, back at Isabella's christening. It was hard to explain, but Violet had sensed that something had shifted within her.

Of all her children, Francesca had always been the most quiet, the most private. She loved her family, but she also loved being apart from them, forging her own identity, making her own life. It was not surprising that she had never chosen to share her feelings about the most painful corner of her life—her infertility. But last time, even though they had not spoken about it explicitly, something had still passed between them, and Violet had almost felt as if she'd been able to absorb some of her grief.

When Francesca had departed, the clouds behind her eyes had been lifted. Violet didn't know whether she had finally accepted her fate, or whether she had simply learned how to rejoice in what she had, but Francesca had seemed, for the first time in Violet's recent memory, unreservedly happy.

Violet ran through the hall—really, at her age!—and pushed open the front door so that she could wait in the drive. Francesca's carriage was nearly there, starting the final turn so that one of the doors would be facing the house.

Violet could see Michael through the window. He waved. She beamed.

"Oh, I've missed you!" she exclaimed, hurrying forward as he hopped down. "You must promise never to wait so long again."

"As if I could refuse you anything," he said, leaning down to kiss her cheek. He turned then, holding his arm out to assist Francesca.

Violet embraced her daughter, then stepped back to look at her. Frannie was...

Glowing.

She was positively radiant.

"I missed you, Mother," she said.

Violet would have made a reply, but she found herself unexpectedly choked up. She felt her lips press together, then twitch at the corners as she fought to contain her tears. She didn't know why she was so emotional. Yes, it had been over a year, but hadn't she gone 342 days before? This was not so very different.

"I have something for you," Francesca said, and Violet could have sworn her eyes were glistening, too. Francesca turned back to the carriage and held out her arms. A maid appeared in the doorway, holding some sort of bundle, which she then handed down to her mistress.

Violet gasped. Dear God, it couldn't be...

"Mother," Francesca said softly, cradling the precious little bundle, "this is John."

The tears, which had been waiting patiently in Violet's eyes, began to roll. "Frannie," she whispered, taking the baby into her arms, "why didn't you tell me?"

And Francesca—her maddening, inscrutable third daughter—said, "I don't know."

"He's beautiful," Violet said, not caring that she'd been kept in the dark. She didn't care about anything in that moment—nothing but the tiny boy in her arms, gazing up at her with an impossibly wise expression.

"He has your eyes," Violet said, looking up at Francesca.

Frannie nodded, and her smile was almost silly, as if she couldn't quite believe it. "I know."

"And your mouth."

"I think you're right."

"And your—oh, my, I think he has your nose as well."

"I'm told," Michael said in an amused voice, "that I was involved in his creation, too, but I have yet to see any evidence."

Francesca looked at him with so much love that it nearly took Violet's breath away. "He has your charm," she said.

Violet laughed, then she laughed again. There was too much happiness inside of her—she couldn't possibly hold it in. "I think it's time we introduced this little fellow to his family," she said. "Don't you?"

Francesca held out her arms to take the baby, but Violet turned away. "Not just yet," she said. She wanted to hold him a while longer. Maybe until Tuesday.

"Mother, I think he might be hungry."

Violet assumed an arch expression. "He'll let us know."

"But—"

"I know a thing or two about babies, Francesca Bridgerton Stirling." Violet grinned down at John. "They adore their grandmamas, for example."

He gurgled and cooed, and then—she was positive—he smiled.

"Come with me, little one," she whispered, "I have so much to tell you."

And behind her, Francesca turned to Michael and said, "Do you think we'll get him back for the duration of the visit?"

He shook his head, then added, "It'll give us more time to see about getting the little fellow a sister."

"Michael!"

"Listen to the man," Violet called, not bothering to turn around.

"Good heavens," Francesca muttered.

But she did listen.

And she did enjoy.

And nine months later, she said good morning to Janet Helen Stirling.
Who looked exactly like her father.