# Prologue

Anthony 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 cou- ples, 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 chil- dren. 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 sunkissed, 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 affec- tion 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 re- lationship with his father was just a little bit special. Not be- cause 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 chil- dren were well loved.

No, Anthony liked to think that his relationship with his father was special simply because he’d known him the lon- gest. 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 opin- ion, 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, know- ing something was wrong, terribly wrong.

“He’s 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 under- stand. I just don’t understand ”

Anthony held her while she cried. He said nothing; 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 them- selves 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. Eventu- ally 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.