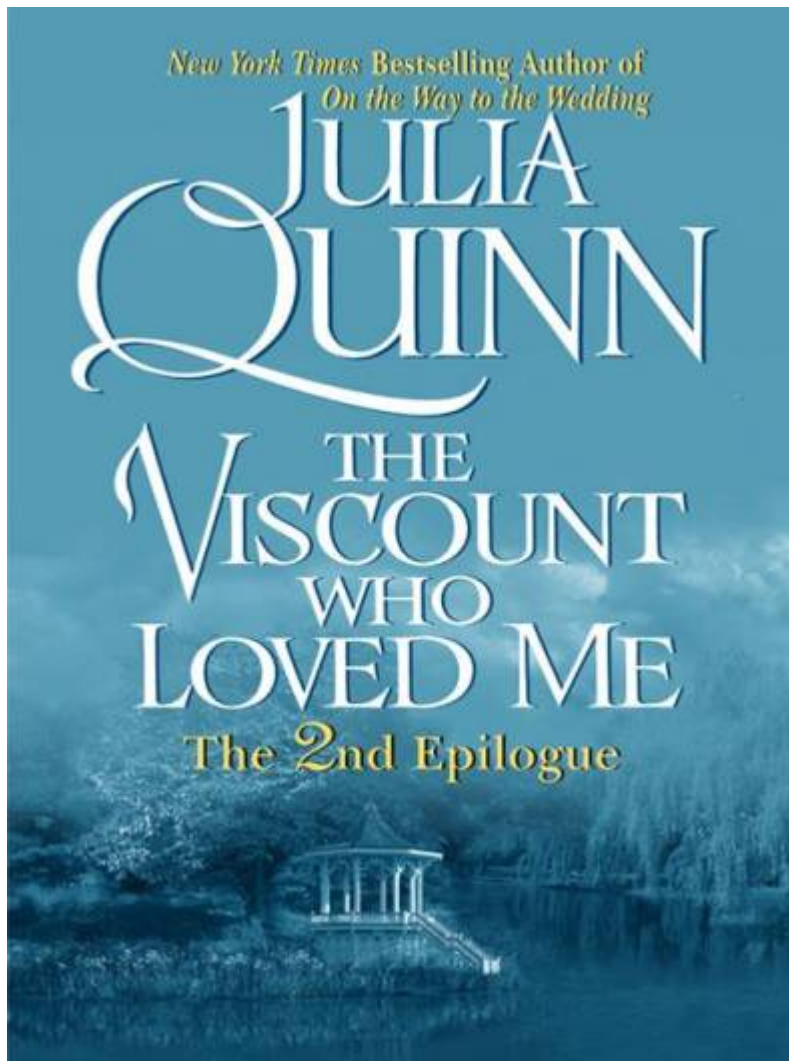




THEVISCOUNT
WHOLOVEDME

JULIAQUINN

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Kate stomped across the lawn, glancing over her shoulder to make sure that her husband was not following her. Fifteen years of marriage had taught her a thing or two, and she knew that he would be watching her every move.

But she was clever. And she was determined. And she knew that for a pound, Anthony's valet could feign the most marvelous sartorial disaster. Something involving jam on the iron, or perhaps an infestation in the wardrobe—spiders, mice, it really didn't matter which—Kate was more than happy to leave the details up to the valet as long as Anthony was suitably distracted long enough for her to make her escape.

"It is mine, all mine," she chortled, in much the same tones she'd used during the previous month's Bridgerton family production of *Macbeth*. Her eldest son had casted the roles; she had been named First Witch.

Kate had pretended not to notice when Anthony had rewarded him with a new horse.

Her husband would pay now. His shirts would be stained pink with raspberry jam, and she—

She was smiling so hard she was laughing.

"Mine mine minemiiiiiiiiine," she sang, wrenching open the door to the shed on the last syllable, which just so happened to be the deep, serious note of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

"Mine mine minemiiiiiiiiine."

She would have it. It was hers. She could practically taste it. She would have tasted it, even, if possible, would somehow have bonded it to her side. She had no taste for wood, of course, but this was no ordinary implement of destruction. This was...

The mallet of death.

"Mine mine minemine mine mine minemine mine mine minemiiiiiiiiine," she continued, moving into the hoppy little section that followed the familiar Beethoven refrain.

She could barely contain herself as she tossed a blanket aside. The Pall Mall set would be resting in the corner, as it always was, and in just a moment—

"Looking for this?"

Kate whirled around. There was Anthony, standing in the doorway, smiling diabolically as he spun the black Pall Mall mallet in his hands.

His shirt was blindingly white.

"You... You..."

One of his brows lifted dangerously. "You never were terribly skilled at vocabulary retrieval when crossed."

"How did you...How did you...?"

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "I paid him five pounds."

"You gave Milton five pounds?" Good Lord, that was practically his annual salary.

"It's a deuced sight cheaper than replacing all of my shirts," he said with a scowl. "Raspberry jam. Really. Have you no thought toward economies?"

Kate stared longingly at the mallet.

"Game's in three days," Anthony said with a pleased sigh, "and I have already won."

Kate didn't contradict him. The other Bridgertons might think the annual Pall Mall rematch began and ended in a day, but she and Anthony knew better.

She'd beaten him to the mallet for three years running. She was damned if he was going to get the better of her this time.

"Give up now, dear wife," Anthony taunted. "Admit defeat, and we shall all be happier."

Kate sighed softly, almost as if she acquiesced.

Anthony's eyes narrowed.

Kate idly touched her fingers to the neckline of her dress.

Anthony's eyes widened.

"It's hot in here, don't you think?" she asked, her voice soft, and sweet, and terribly breathless.

"You little minx," he murmured.

She slid the fabric from her shoulders. She wasn't wearing anything underneath.

"No buttons?" he whispered.

She shook her head. She wasn't stupid. Even the best laid plans could find their way awry. One always had to dress for the occasion. There was still a slight chill in the air, and she felt her nipples tighten into insulted little buds.

Kate shivered, then tried to hide it with a breathy pant, as if she were desperately aroused.

Which she might have been, had she not been single-mindedly focused on trying not to focus on the mallet in her husband's hand.

Not to mention the chill.

“Lovely,” Anthony murmured, reaching out and stroking the side of her breast.

Kate made a mewling sound. He could never resist that.

Anthony smiled slowly, then moved his hand forward, until he could roll her nipple between his fingers.

Kate let out a gasp, and her eyes flew to his. He looked—not calculating exactly, but still, very much in control. And it occurred to her—he knew precisely what she could never resist.

“Ah, wife,” he murmured, cupping her breast from the bottom, and lifting it higher until it sat plump in his hand.

He smiled.

Kate stopped breathing.

He bent forward and took the bud in his mouth.

“Oh!” She wasn’t faking anything now.

He repeated his torture on the other side.

Then he stepped back.

Back.

Kate stood still, panting.

“Ah, to have a painting of this,” he said. “I would hang it in my office.”

Kate’s mouth fell open.

He held up the mallet in triumph. “Goodbye, dear wife.” He exited the shed, then poked his head back ’round the corner. “Try not to catch a chill. You’d hate to miss the rematch, wouldn’t you?”

He was lucky, Kate later reflected, that she hadn’t thought to grab one of the Pall Mall balls when she’d been rummaging for the set. Although on second thought, his head was probably far too hard for her to have made a dent.

The following day

There were few moments, Anthony decided, quite so delicious as the utter and complete besting of one’s wife. It depended upon the wife, of course, but as he had chosen to wed a woman of superb intellect and wit, his moments, he was sure, were more delicious than most.

He savored this over tea in his office, sighing with pleasure as he gazed upon the black mallet, which lay across his desk like a prized trophy. It looked gorgeous, gleaming in the morning light—or at least gleaming where it wasn’t scuffed and battered from decades of rough play.

No matter. Anthony loved every last dent and scratch. Perhaps it was childish, infantile even, but he adored it.

Mostly he adored that he had it in his possession, but he was still rather fond of it. When he was able to forget that he had brilliantly snatched it from under Kate's nose, he actually recalled that it marked something else—

The day he'd fallen in love.

Not that he'd realized it at the time. Nor had Kate, he imagined, but he was certain that that was the day they had been fated to be together—the day of the infamous Pall Mall match.

She had left him with the pink mallet. She had sent his ball into the lake.

God, what a woman.

It had been a most excellent fifteen years.

He smiled contentedly, then let his gaze drop to the black mallet again. Every year they replayed the match. All of the original players—Anthony, Kate, his brother Colin, his sister Daphne and her husband Simon, and Kate's sister Edwina—they all trooped dutifully to Aubrey Hall each spring and took up their places on the ever-shifting course. Some agreed to attend with zeal and some with mere amusement, but they were all there, every year.

And this year—

Anthony chortled with glee. He had the mallet and Kate did not.

Life was good. Life was very, very good.

The day after that

“Kaaaaaaaaaaaate!”

Kate looked up from her book.

“Kaaaaaaaaaaaate!”

She tried to gauge his distance. After fifteen years of hearing her name bellowed in much the same fashion, she'd become quite proficient at calculating the time between the first roar and her husband's appearance.

It was not as straightforward a calculation as it might seem. There was her location to consider—was she upstairs or down, visible from the doorway, et cetera, et cetera.

Then one had to add in the children. Were they at home? Possibly in his way? They would slow him down, certainly, perhaps even by a full minute, and—

“You!”

Kate blinked with surprise. Anthony was in the doorway, panting with exertion and glaring at her with a surprising degree of venom.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

Well, perhaps not so surprising.

She blinked impassively. “Would you like to sit down?” she inquired. “You look somewhat overexerted.”

“Kate...”

“You’re not as young as you used to be,” she said with a sigh.

“Kate...” The volume was rising.

“I can ring for tea,” she said sweetly.

“It was locked,” he growled. “My office was locked.”

“Was it?” she murmured.

“I have the only key.”

“Do you?”

His eyes widened. “What have you done?”

She flipped a page, even though she wasn’t looking at the print. “When?”

“What do you mean, when?”

“I mean—” She paused, because this was not a moment to let pass without proper internal celebration. “When. This morning? Or last month?”

It took him a moment. No more than a second or two, but it was just long enough for Kate to watch his expression slide from confusion to suspicion to outrage.

It was glorious. Enchanting. Delicious. She’d have cackled with it, but that would only encourage another month of “Double, double toil and trouble” jokes, and she’d only just got him to cease.

“You made a key to my office?”

“I am your wife,” she said, glancing at her fingernails. “There should be no secrets between us, don’t you think?”

“You made a key?”

“You wouldn’t wish for me to keep secrets, would you?”

His fingers gripped the doorframe until his knuckles turned white. “Stop looking like you’re enjoying this,” he ground out.

“Ah, but that would be a lie, and it’s a sin to lie to one’s husband.”

Strange choking sounds began to emanate from his throat.

Kate smiled. "Didn't I pledge honesty at some point?"

"That was obedience," he growled.

"Obedience? Surely not."

"Where is it?"

She shrugged. "Not telling."

"Kate!"

She slid into a singsong. "Nottellllllllling."

"Woman..." He moved forward. Dangerously.

Kate swallowed. There was a small, rather tiny, actually, but nonetheless very real chance that she might have gone just a wee bit too far.

"I will tie you to the bed," he warned.

"Yeeeeeesss," she said, acknowledging his point as she gauged the distance to the door. "But I might not mind it precisely."

His eyes flared, not quite with desire—he was still too focused on the Pall Mall mallet for that—but she rather thought she saw a flash of...interest there.

"Tie you up, you say," he murmured, moving forward, "and you'd like it, eh?"

Kate caught his meaning and gasped. "You wouldn't!"

"Oh, I would."

He was aiming for a repeat performance. He was going to tie her up and leave her there while he searched for the mallet.

Not if she had anything to say about it.

Kate scrambled over the arm of her chair and then scooted behind it. Always good to have a physical barrier in situations like these.

"Oh, Kaaaaate," he taunted, moving toward her.

"It's mine," she declared. "It was mine fifteen years ago, and it's still mine."

"It was mine before it was yours."

"But you married me!"

“And this makes it yours?”

She said nothing, just locked her eyes with his. She was breathless, panting, caught up in the rush of the moment.

And then, fast as lightning, he jumped forward, reaching over the chair, catching hold of her shoulder for a brief moment before she squirmed away.

“You will never find it,” she practically shrieked, scooting behind the sofa.

“Don’t think you’ll escape now,” he warned, doing a sideways sort of maneuver that put him between her and the door.

She eyed the window.

“The fall would kill you,” he said.

“Oh, for the love of God,” came a voice from the doorway.

Kate and Anthony turned. Anthony’s brother Colin was standing there, regarding them both with an air of disgust.

“Colin,” Anthony said tightly. “How nice to see you.”

Colin merely quirked a brow. “I suppose you’re looking forthis .”

Kate gasped. He was holding the black mallet. “How did you—”

Colin stroked the blunt, cylindrical end almost lovingly. “I can only speak for myself, of course,” he said with a happy sigh, “but as far as I’m concerned, I’ve already won.”

Game day

“I fail to comprehend,” Anthony’s sister Daphne remarked, “why you get to set up the course.”

“Because I bloody well own the lawn,” he bit off. He held his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun as he inspected his work. He’d done a brilliant job this time, if he did say so himself. It was diabolical.

Pure genius.

“Any chance you might be capable of refraining from profanity in the company of ladies?” This, from Daphne’s husband Simon, the Duke of Hastings.

“She’s no lady,” Anthony grumbled. “She’s my sister.”

“She’s my wife.”

Anthony smirked. “She was my sister first.”

Simon turned to Kate, who was tapping her mallet—green, which she’d declared herself happy with, but

Anthony knew better—against the grass.

“How,” he asked, “do you tolerate him?”

She shrugged. “It’s a talent few possess.”

Colin stepped up, clutching the black mallet like the Holy Grail. “Shall we begin?” he asked grandly.

Simon’s lips parted with surprise. “The mallet of death?”

“I’m very clever,” Colin confirmed.

“He bribed the housemaid,” Kate grumbled.

“You bribed my valet,” Anthony pointed out.

“So did you!”

“I bribed no one,” Simon said, to no one in particular. Daphne patted his arm condescendingly. “You were not born to this family.”

“Neither was she,” he returned, motioning to Kate.

Daphne pondered that. “She is an aberration,” she finally concluded.

“An aberration?” Kate demanded.

“It’s the highest of compliments,” Daphne informed her. She paused, then added, “In this context.” She then turned to Colin. “How much?”

“How much what?”

“How much did you give the housemaid?”

He shrugged. “Ten pounds.”

“Tenpounds ?” Daphne nearly shrieked.

“Are you mad?” Anthony demanded.

“You gave the valet five,” Kate reminded him.

“I hope it wasn’t one of the good housemaids,” Anthony grumbled, “for she’ll surely quit by the day’s end with that sort of money in her pocket.”

“All of the housemaids are good,” Kate said, with some irritation.

“Ten pounds,” Daphne repeated, shaking her head. “I’m going to tell your wife.”

“Go ahead,” Colin said indifferently as he nodded toward the hill sloping down to the Pall Mall course. “She’s right there.”

Daphne looked up. "Penelope's here?"

"Penelope's here?" Anthony barked. "Why?"

"She's my wife," Colin returned.

"She's never attended before."

"She wanted to see me win," Colin shot back, rewarding his brother with a sickly stretch of a smile.

Anthony resisted the urge to throttle him. Barely. "And how do you know you're going to win?"

Colin waved the black mallet before him. "I already have."

"Good day, all," Penelope said, ambling down to the gathering.

"No cheering," Anthony warned her.

Penelope blinked in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"And under no circumstances," he continued, because really, someone had to make sure the game retained some integrity, "may you come within ten paces of your husband."

Penelope looked at Colin, bobbed her head nine times as she estimated the steps between them, and took a step back.

"There will be no cheating," Anthony warned.

"At least nonew types of cheating," Simon added. "Previously established cheating techniques are permissible."

"May I speak with my husband during the course of play?" Penelope inquired mildly.

"No!" A resounding chorus, three voices strong.

"You'll notice," Simon said to her, "that I made no objection."

"As I said," Daphne said, brushing by him on her way to inspect a wicket, "you were not born of this family."

"Where is Edwina?" Colin asked briskly, squinting up toward the house.

"She'll be down shortly," Kate replied. "She was finishing breakfast."

"She is delaying the play."

Kate turned to Daphne. "My sister does not share our devotion to the game."

"She thinks we're all mad?" Daphne asked.

“Quite.”

“Well, she is sweet to come down every year,” Daphne said.

“It’s tradition,” Anthony barked. He’d managed to get hold of the orange mallet and was swinging it against an imaginary ball, narrowing his eyes as he rehearsed his aim.

“He hasn’t been practicing the course, has he?” Colin demanded.

“How could he?” Simon asked. “He only just set it up this morning. We all watched him.”

Colin ignored him and turned to Kate. “Has he made any strange nocturnal disappearances recently?”

She gaped at him. “You think he’s been sneaking out to play Pall Mall by the light of the moon?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Colin grumbled.

“Neither would I,” Kate replied, “but I assure you, he has been sleeping in his own bed.”

“It’s not a matter of beds,” Colin informed her. “It’s a matter of competition.”

“This can’t be an appropriate conversation in front of a lady,” Simon said, but it was clear he was enjoying himself.

Anthony shot Colin an irritated look, then sent one in Simon’s direction for good measure. The conversation was growing ludicrous, and it was well past time they began the match. “Where is Edwina?” he demanded.

“I see her coming down the hill,” Kate replied.

He looked up to see Edwina Bagwell, Kate’s younger sister, trudging down the slope. She’d never been much for outdoor pursuits, and he could well imagine her sighing and rolling her eyes.

“Pink for me this year,” Daphne declared, plucking one of the remaining mallets from the stack. “I am feeling feminine and delicate.” She gave her brothers an arch look. “Deceptively so.”

Simon reached behind her and selected the yellow mallet. “Blue for Edwina, of course.”

“Edwina always gets blue,” Kate said to Penelope.

“Why?”

Kate paused. “I don’t know.”

“What about purple?” Penelope asked.

“Oh, we never use that.”

“Why?”

Kate paused again. “I don’t know.”

“Tradition,” Anthony put in.

“Then why do the rest of you switch colors every year?” Penelope persisted.

Anthony turned to his brother. “Does she always ask so many questions?”

“Always.”

He turned back to Penelope and said, “We like it this way.”

“I’m here!” Edwina called out cheerfully as she approached the rest of the players. “Oh, blue again. How thoughtful.” She picked up her equipment, then turned to Anthony. “Shall we play?”

He gave a nod, then turned to Simon. “You’re first, Hastings.”

“As always,” he murmured, and he dropped his ball into the starting position. “Stand back,” he warned, even though no one was within swinging distance. He drew his mallet back and then brought it forward with a magnificent crack. The ball went sailing across the lawn, straight and true, landing mere yards from the next wicket.

“Oh, well done!” Penelope cheered, clapping her hands.

“I said no cheering,” Anthony grumbled. Couldn’t anyone follow instructions these days?

“Even for Simon?” Penelope returned. “I thought it was just Colin.”

Anthony set his ball down carefully. “It’s distracting.”

“As if the rest of us aren’t distracting,” Colin commented. “Cheer away, darling.”

But she held silent as Anthony took aim. His swing was even more powerful than the duke’s, and his ball rolled even farther.

“Hmmm, bad luck there,” Kate said.

Anthony turned on her suspiciously. “What do you mean? It was a brilliant swing.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Out of my way,” Colin ordered, marching to the starting position.

Anthony locked eyes with his wife. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” she said offhandedly, “just that it’s a trifle muddy right there.”

“Muddy?” Anthony looked toward his ball, then back to his wife, then back to the ball. “It hasn’t rained for days.”

“Hmmm, no.”

He looked back to his wife. His maddening, diabolical, and soon-to-be-locked-in-a-dungeon wife.
“How did it get muddy?”

“Well, perhaps not muddy ...”

“Not muddy,” he repeated, with far more patience than she deserved.

“Puddle-ish might be more appropriate.”

Words failed him.

“Puddly?” She scrunched her face a touch. “How does one make an adjective out of a puddle?”

He took a step in her direction. She darted behind Daphne.

“What is happening?” Daphne asked, twisting about.

Kate poked her head out and smiled triumphantly. “I do believe he’s going to kill me.”

“With so many witnesses?” Simon asked.

“How,” Anthony demanded, “did a puddle form in the midst of the driest spring of my recollection?”

Kate shot him another one of her annoying grins. “I spilled my tea.”

“An entire puddle’s worth?”

She shrugged. “I was cold.”

“Cold.”

“And thirsty.”

“And apparently clumsy, as well,” Simon put in.

Anthony glared at him.

“Well, if you are going to kill her,” Simon said, “would you mind waiting until my wife is out from between you?” He turned to Kate. “How did you know where to put the puddle?”

“He’s very predictable,” she replied.

Anthony stretched out his fingers and measured her throat.

“Every year,” she said, smiling straight at him. “You always put the first wicket in the same place, and you always hit the ball precisely the same way.”

Colin chose that moment to return. “Your play, Kate.”

She darted out from behind Daphne and scooted toward the starting pole. “All’s fair, dear husband,” she called out gaily. And then she bent forward, aimed, and sent the green ball flying.

Straight into the puddle.

Anthony sighed happily. There was justice in this world, after all.

Thirty minutes later Kate was waiting by her ball near the third wicket.

"Pity about the mud," Colin said, strolling past.

She glared at him.

Daphne passed by a moment later. "You've a bit in..." She motioned to her hair. "Yes, there," she added, when Kate brushed furiously against her temple. "Although there is a bit more, well..." She cleared her throat. "Er, everywhere."

Kate glared at her.

Simon stepped up to join them. Good God, did everyone need to pass by the third wicket on their way to the fifth?

"You've a bit of mud," he said helpfully.

Kate's fingers wrapped more tightly around her mallet. His head was so very, very close.

"But at least it's mixed with tea," he added.

"What has that to do with anything?" Daphne asked.

"I'm not certain," Kate heard him say as he and Daphne took their leave toward wicket number five, "but it seemed as if I ought to say something."

Kate counted to ten in her head, and then sure enough, Edwina happened across her, Penelope trailing three steps behind. The pair had become something of a team, with Edwina doing all the swinging and Penelope consulting on strategy.

"Oh, Kate," Edwina said with a pitying sigh.

"Don't say it," Kate growled.

"You did make the puddle," Edwina pointed out.

"Whose sister are you?" Kate demanded.

Edwina gave her an arch smile. "Sisterly devotion does not obscure my sense of fair play."

"This is Pall Mall. There is no fair play."

"Apparently not," Penelope remarked.

“Ten paces,” Kate warned.

“From Colin, not from you,” Penelope returned. “Although I do believe I shall remain at least a mallet’s length away at all times.”

“Shall we go?” Edwina inquired. She turned to Kate. “We just finished with the fourth wicket.”

“And you needed to take the long way ’round?” Kate muttered.

“It seemed only sporting to pay you a visit,” Edwina demurred.

She and Penelope turned to walk away, and then Kate blurted it out. She couldn’t help herself. “Where is Anthony?”

Edwina and Penelope turned. “Do you really want to know?” Penelope asked.

Kate forced herself to nod.

“On the last wicket, I’m afraid,” Penelope replied.

“Before or after?” Kate ground out.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Is he before the wicket or after it?” she repeated impatiently. And then, when Penelope did not answer instantly she added, “Has he gone through the bloody thing yet?”

Penelope blinked with surprise. “Er, no. He has about two more strokes, I should think. Perhaps three.”

Kate watched them depart through narrowed eyes. She wasn’t going to win—there was no chance of that now. But if she couldn’t win, then by God, neither would Anthony. He deserved no glory this day, not after tripping her and sending her tumbling into the mud puddle.

Oh, he’d claimed it was an accident, but Kate found it highly suspicious that his ball had gone spluttering out of the puddle at the exact moment she’d stepped forward to reach her own ball. She’d had to do a little hop to avoid it and was congratulating herself on her near miss when Anthony had swung around with a patently false, “I say, are you all right?”

His mallet had swung with him, conveniently at ankle level. Kate had not been able to outhop that one, and she’d gone flying into the mud.

Face down.

And then Anthony had had the gall to offer her a handkerchief.

She was going to kill him.

Kill.

Kill kill kill.

But first she was going to make sure he didn't win.

Anthony was smiling broadly—whistling, even—as he waited his turn. It was taking a ridiculously long amount of time to get back 'round to him, what with Kate so far behind that someone had to dash back to let her know when it was her turn, not to mention Edwina, who never seemed to understand the virtue of speedy play. It had been bad enough the last fourteen years, with her ambling along as if she had all day, but now she had Penelope, who would not allow her to hit the ball without her analysis and advice.

But for once, Anthony didn't mind. He was in the lead, so far so that no one could possibly catch up. And just to make his victory all the sweeter, Kate was in last place.

So far so that she could not hope to overtake anyone.

It almost made up for the fact that Colin had snatched the mallet of death.

He turned toward the last wicket. He needed one stroke to get his ball at the ready, and one more to push it through. After that, he needed only to steer it to the final pole and end the game with a tap.

Child's play.

He glanced back over his shoulder. He could see Daphne standing by the old oak tree. She was at the crest of a hill, and thus could see down where he could not.

"Whose turn is it?" he called out.

She craned her neck as she watched the others playing down the hill. "Colin's, I believe," she said, twisting back around, "which means Kate is next."

He smiled at that.

He'd set the course up a little differently this year, in something of a circular fashion. The players had to follow a twisting pattern, which meant that as the crow flew, he was actually closer to Kate than he was to the others. In fact, he need only move about ten yards to the south, and he'd be able to watch her as she pushed on toward the fourth wicket.

Or was it merely the third?

Either way, he wasn't going to miss it.

So, with a grin on his face, he jogged over. Should he call out? It would irritate her more if he called out.

But that would be cruel. And on the other hand—

CRACK!

Anthony looked up from his ponderings just in time to see the green ball hurtling in his direction.

What the devil?

Kate let out a triumphant cackle, picked up her skirts and began running over.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” Anthony demanded. “The fourth wicket is that way.” He jabbed his finger in the appropriate direction even though he knew she knew where it was.

“I’m only on the third wicket,” she said archly, “and anyway, I’ve given up on winning. It’s hopeless at this point, don’t you think?”

Anthony looked at her, then he looked at his ball, resting peacefully near the last wicket.

Then he looked at her again.

“Oh no you don’t,” he growled.

She smiled slowly.

Deviously.

Like a witch.

“Watch me,” she said.

Just then Colin came dashing over the rise. “Your turn, Anthony!”

“How is that possible?” he demanded. “Kate just went, so there is Daphne, Edwina, and Simon between.”

“We went very quickly,” Simon said, striding forward. “We certainly don’t want to miss this.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” he muttered, watching as the rest of them hurried near. He stalked over to his ball, narrowing his eyes as he prepared his aim.

“Be careful of the tree root!” Penelope called out.

Anthony grit his teeth.

“It wasn’t cheering,” she said, her face magnificently bland. “Surely a warning doesn’t qualify as cheer—”

“Shut up,” Anthony ground out.

“We all have our place in this game,” she said, lips twitching.

Anthony turned around. “Colin!” he barked. “If you don’t wish to find yourself a widower, kindly muzzle your wife.”

Colin walked over to Penelope. “I love you,” he said, kissing her on the cheek.

“And I—”

“Stop it!” Anthony exploded. When all eyes turned to him, he added, rather in a grunt, “I’m trying to

concentrate.”

Kate danced in a little closer.

“Get away from me, woman.”

“I just want to see,” she said. “I’ve hardly had the chance to see anything this game, being so far behind the entire time.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I might be responsible for the mud, and please note my emphasis on the word might, which does not imply any sort of confirmation on my part.”

He paused, quite pointedly ignoring the rest of the gathering, all of whom were gaping at him.

“However,” he continued, “I fail to see how your position in last place is my responsibility.”

“The mud made my hands slippery,” she ground out. “I could not properly grip the mallet.”

Off to the side, Colin winced. “Weak, I’m afraid, Kate. I’ll have to grant this point to Anthony, much as it pains me.”

“Fine,” she said, after tossing Colin a withering glare. “It’s no one’s fault but my own. However.”

And then she said nothing.

“Er, however what?” Edwina finally inquired.

Kate could have been a queen with her scepter as she stood there, all covered with mud. “However,” she continued regally, “I don’t have to like it. And this being Pall Mall, and we being Bridgertons, I don’t have to play fair.”

Anthony shook his head and bent back down to make his aim.

“She has a point this time,” Colin said, irritating sod that he was. “Good sportsmanship has never been valued highly in this game.”

“Be quiet,” Anthony grunted.

“In fact,” Colin continued, “one could make the argument that—”

“I said be quiet.”

“—the opposite is true, and that bad sportsmanship—”

“Shut up, Colin.”

“—is in fact to be lauded, and—”

Anthony decided to give up and take a swing. At this rate they’d be standing there until Michaelmas. Colin was never going to stop talking, not when he thought he had a chance of irritating his brother.

Anthony forced himself to hear nothing but the wind. Or at least he tried.

He aimed.

He drew back.

Crack!

Not too hard, not too hard.

The ball rolled forward, unfortunately not quite far enough. He was not going to make it through the last wicket on his next try. At least not without intervention divine enough to send his ball around a fist-sized stone.

“Colin, you’re next,” Daphne said, but he was already dashing back to his ball. He gave it a haphazard tap, then yelled out, “Kate!”

She stepped forward, blinking as she assessed the lay of the land. Her ball was about a foot away from Anthony’s. The stone, however, was on the other side, meaning that if she attempted to sabotage him, she couldn’t send him very far—surely the stone would stop the ball.

“An interesting dilemma,” Anthony murmured.

Kate circled around the balls. “It would be a romantic gesture,” she mused, “if I allowed you to win.”

“Oh, it’s not a question of your allowing,” he taunted.

“Wrong answer,” she said, and she aimed.

Anthony narrowed his eyes. What was she doing?

Kate hit the ball with a fair bit of force, aiming not squarely at his ball but at the left side. Her ball slammed into his, sending it spiraling off to the right. Because of the angle, she couldn’t send it as far as she might have with a direct shot, but she did manage to get it right to the top of the hill.

Right to the top.

Right to the top.

And then down it.

Kate let out a whoop of delight that would not have been out of place on a battlefield.

“You’ll pay,” Anthony said.

She was too busy jumping up and down to pay him any attention.

“Who do you suppose will win now?” Penelope asked.

“Do you know,” Anthony said quietly, “I don’t care.” And then he walked over to the green ball and took aim.

“Hold up, it’s not your turn!” Edwina called out.

“And it’s not your ball,” Penelope added.

“Is that so?” he murmured, and then let fly, smashing his mallet into Kate’s ball and sending it hurtling across the lawn, down the shallower slope, and into the lake.

Kate let out a huff of outrage. “That wasn’t very sporting of you!”

He gave her a maddening grin. “All’s fair and all that, wife.”

“You will fish it out,” she retorted.

“You’re the one who needs a bath.”

Daphne let out a chuckle, and then said, “I think it must be my turn. Shall we continue?”

She departed, Simon, Edwina, and Penelope in her wake.

“Colin!” Daphne barked.

“Oh, very well,” he grumbled, and he trailed along after them.

Kate looked up at her husband, her lips beginning to twitch. “Well,” she said, scratching at a spot on her ear that was particularly caked with mud, “I suppose that’s the end of the match for us.”

“I’d say.”

“Brilliant job this year.”

“You as well,” he added, smiling down at her. “The puddle was inspired.”

“I thought so,” she said, with no modesty whatsoever. “And, well, about the mud...”

“It was notquite on purpose,” he murmured.

“I should have done the same,” she allowed.

“Yes, I know.”

“I am filthy,” she said, looking down at herself.

“The lake’s right there,” he said.

“It’s so cold.”

“A bath, then?”

She smiled seductively. “You’ll join me?”

“But of course.”

He held out his arm and together they began to stroll back toward the house.

“Should we have told them we forfeit?” Kate asked.

“No.”

“Colin’s going to try to steal the black mallet, you know.”

He looked at her with interest. “You think he’ll attempt to remove it from Aubrey Hall?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, with great emphasis. “We shall have to join forces.”

“Oh, indeed.”

They walked on a few more yards, and then Kate said, “But once we have it back...”

He looked at her in horror. “Oh, then it’s every man for himself. You didn’t think—”

“No,” she said hastily. “Absolutely not.”

“Then we are agreed,” Anthony said, with some relief. Really, where would the fun be if he couldn’t trounce Kate?

They walked on a few seconds more, and then Kate said, “I’m going to win next year.”

“I know you think you will.”

“No, I will. I have ideas. Strategies.”

Anthony laughed, then leaned down to kiss her, mud and all. “I have ideas, too,” he said with a smile. “And many, many strategies.”

She licked her lips. “We’re not talking about Pall Mall any longer, are we?”

He shook his head.

She wrapped her arms around him, her hands pulling his head back down to hers. And then, in the moment before his lips took hers, he heard her sigh—

“Good.”

About the Author

JULIAQUINN started writing her first book one month after finishing college and has been tapping away at her keyboard ever since.

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