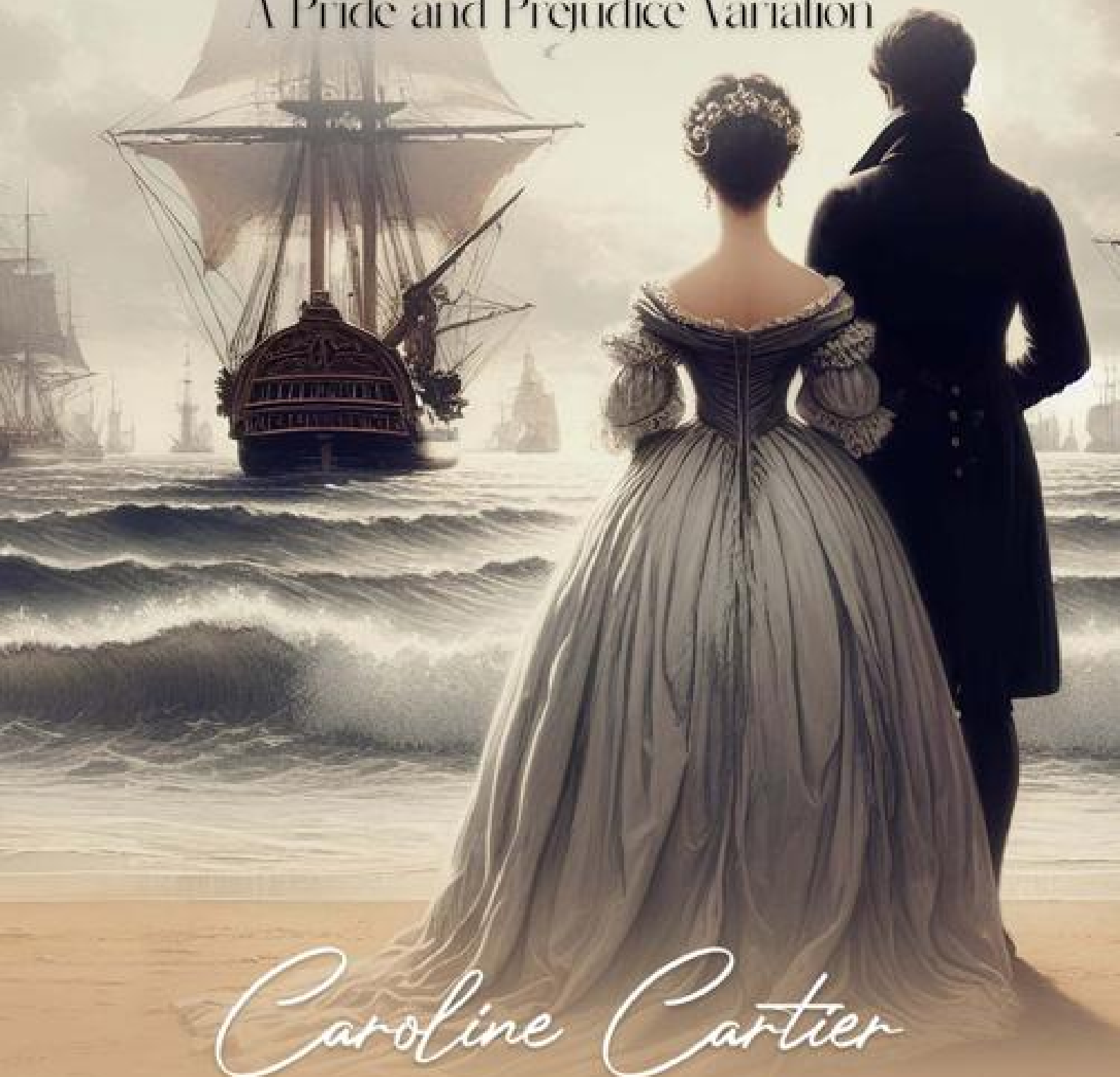


A Mutual Accord

A Pride and Prejudice Variation



Caroline Cartier

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A MUTUAL ACCORD
A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
VARIATION



CAROLINE CARTIER



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FOREWORD

Who is the Count of St Germain?

The Count of St Germain is a mysterious legendary figure who has intrigued historians, occultists, and conspiracy theorists for centuries. Known for his wit, charm, and seemingly endless knowledge, St Germain appeared across European courts in the 18th century, claiming to possess incredible talents and knowledge, and was acquainted with figures such as Voltaire and Casanova.

St Germain was fluent in every European language, speaking each without flaw as if he had lived in the countries in question all of his life. He was a talented musician, painter, and composer, his performances well received in numerous royal courts. He was reported to be present at many important moments throughout history, including the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

In addition to his artistic talents, he displayed impressive knowledge of science, alchemy, and medicine, in addition to his claims of knowledge regarding the secrets of immortality and powerful elixirs, as well as the ability to create flawless jewels and transmute base metals into pure gold.

The Count of St Germain claimed to be centuries old, having met figures as far back as Christ himself. He gained the trust of several rulers, including Frederick the Great of Prussia and Louis XV, and was an influential political advisor.

What is Alchemy?

Even after months of research, this author must admit that she still understands little of the concept of the mysterious practice of alchemy, which is an ancient practice combining philosophy, mysticism, spirituality, and science. Its origins are particularly strong in Egypt, the cultures of Islam, China, and later, mediaeval Europe.

The interests of alchemists surround the properties of the philosopher's stone, immortality, medicine, and the ability to transform base metals into pure gold. Alchemy was not only about immortality and riches. The journey of an alchemist is one of self-purification and enlightenment, in which the secrets of the universe are learned through intense study, meditation, and experimentation.

Early alchemists developed many laboratory techniques and equipment that paved the way for modern chemistry and science. The practices of distillation, crystallisation, and other experimental methods are still used today in medicine and research.

How do alchemy and the Count of St Germain pertain to this story?

When I learned the legend of the Count of St Germain, I knew immediately that he was the perfect guest character for an Austenesque adventure. A mysterious figure, cloaked in legend, filled with fantastical tales, dripping in jewels and gold trinkets, who plays every instrument like an angel, and is able to heal the sick? Yes please!

But how to make my St Germain different from all of the other fictional accounts littered throughout literature and Hollywood? After a great deal of research, I came to the following conclusion. There are a few different explanations for the Count's seeming immortality. The first? Vampirism! I knew immediately that I did not want a vampire story. Other fictional accounts portray the *comte* as a time traveller. I knew that was not right either. The last option was the legend of The Wandering Jew, also known as Cartaphilus.

St Germain and The Wandering Jew are two separate legends, though it has been suggested throughout history that

they may be the same man, though those accounts are not taken seriously. I knew that this was the story I wanted. Is it likely that The Count of St Germain was cursed by Christ himself? Not very, but to my mind, it must be at least as likely as vampirism.

The mystery surrounding alchemy and the Count of St Germain allowed me to use a significant amount of creative licence to the advantage of the story, and the path of St Germain throughout the royal courts of history creates a backdrop of intrigue that sets the scene for an exciting adventure that I hope you will all enjoy.

One of my favourite things about historical fiction is the opportunity for edification as one reads or writes it, and to that end, an incredible amount of research went into this story. When I researched the Martello Towers, what I discovered inspired a scene that thrilled me, and will undoubtedly excite many fans of Mr Tolkein. I hope that I have done my very best recording places and times, including the Wish Tower, and the area around Eastbourne, as well as the royal courts and cities along St Germain's journeys. A few fictional liberties have been taken for the sake of the story, but otherwise, the accounts within are as genuine as I could make them, and I hope you all enjoy my version of these events. I always say, history tells the story. Follow the research and the story will come!

*****The stories and accounts within are in no way an acknowledgement of a belief in, or an encouragement of the occult.*****

*For Donny, because the Count of St Germain was his idea,
and he was so adorably excited to tell me about it...*

PROLOGUE



Jerusalem, 33 AD

MADNESS. The brown dirt street was filled with dust. Dust, people, women, men, children, soldiers, screams, cheers. The streets were filled with many things, but that day they were primarily filled with madness. Cartaphilus saw it more clearly looking back over the years. The cobblestone and dirt roads had been filled with utter insanity, and they had all been consumed by it.

A man struggled up the lane as the mob ran about him, cheering and screaming. He nearly buckled under the weight of a crucifix fashioned from the wood of a great olive tree. Blood ran down his face as he wept, and staggered away from Jerusalem, up the hill to Golgotha.

Cartaphilus ran with the crowd and cheered, as filled with lust for blood as any other. His ears buzzed, and he had never felt so alive. The shouts of Jews and Romans filled the air, as the man stumbled and cried out, falling to his knees in the street.

Cartaphilus dashed forward and cuffed the man on the head, "Get up!" he cried. "Get up, get up! This is no time to rest!" He grazed his wrist on the crown of thorns on the man's head.

The man turned reproachful eyes upon him. "I will go, and you will wait until I return."

Cartaphilus struck the man again, and ran ahead, cheering with the others. *Madness.*

An abomination happened that day. An abomination against God. Against humanity itself...

SIXTY YEARS LATER:

CARTAPHILUS WATCHED SADLY as an elderly woman, his second wife, threw crockery at him from across the room.

“Get out, *get out!* Vile beast! Demon! You are unholy! You never change, while the rest of us grow old and die! You are stealing our life, that is what you are doing! Get away!” The woman collapsed, sobbing, on the floor. His youngest son stood in the doorway, a grandfather, already grey, eyes filled with distrust and fear. His eldest son was already dead.

“Go,” his son ordered him. “Go, and take your evil with you.”

He went... He never returned...

CHAPTER 1



*I*t is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of five daughters must be in want of a son-in-law. However little known the feelings or views of the man may be when a new gentleman enters a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the others in his household, that he is considered rightfully obligated to seek such a relation out the moment a single gentleman enters the neighbourhood.

“Mr Bennet, have you heard? Netherfield Park is let at last!”

“Is that so, my dear,” mumbled Mr Thomas Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire, who then continued to read his newspaper without further comment.

“Well, do you not wish to know who has taken it?” Mrs Frances Bennet nee Gardiner demanded, outraged, that he had not shown more interest in the matter.

“*You* want to tell me, my dear, and *I* have no objection to hearing it,” answered her husband with a sigh, looking at his second daughter for rescue and finding none. His two eldest sat on a couch near the fire with their embroidery, while his two youngest took apart a bonnet by the window. His middle daughter did not even look up from the treatise she was reading.

“My sister Phillips tells me that a young man, a Mr Bingham, has come down from the north in a chaise and four to view the place. He was here on Monday, and was so much

delighted with the house that he took it right away. He is to take possession by Michaelmas, and will send his servants next week.”

“Mr Bingham, is it?” replied her husband.

“Yes, Mr Bennet. And he is a man of fortune, too. Five thousand a year, and very likely more! What a fine thing for our girls!” his wife cried.

“*Our* girls? How can it possibly affect them?” returned Bennet.

“Oh, Mr Bennet, how can you be so vexing? You know he must marry one of them! *Jane Binfield!* How well that sounds!”

“Your sister is well informed indeed if she has already learned that this is his design in settling here,” her spouse said.

“Design! Oh you tiresome man, you must know that it is very likely that he will fall in love with one of them!” said Mrs Bennet. “That is why, as soon as he arrives, you must go and visit this Mr Bentley at once.”

“I can see no call for that. You and the girls may go, with my permission. Or better yet, send them on their own. You are as handsome as any of them, he might like you the best of all the party, and then I should be obliged to call him out, and I am much too old to duel any man.”

“Mr Bennet, you bothersome man, when a woman has five daughters grown up, it is time to give over thinking of her own beauty! If our Jane could make a match with this Mr Bimsby, I would be very well pleased! A house in town! Fine carriages! Five thousand a year, and very likely more! But you must not be obstinate! You *must* visit, Mr Bennet; I insist upon it!”

“Do you, my dear?” Bennet said curiously.

“I do, Mr Bennet! Think of what such an establishment could mean for our daughters! Sir William and Lady Lucas are set on going for just such a reason, and you could do no less for your daughters than Sir William Lucas!” insisted his wife indignantly.

“Of course, my dear. How right you are.” Mr Bennet lifted his wife’s hand to his lips. “You command, and I obey.”

Mr Bennet was such a strange, mercurial mixture of oddness, sarcasm, humour, reserve, indolence, and contrariness, that twenty-three years had been insufficient for his wife to understand him, but she was never in doubt that he loved her. In all of their lives, the Bennet girls had never understood what drew their parents to one another, for Mrs Bennet was so different from her husband. A woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper, she had proven unequal to becoming the companion of Mr Bennet’s hopes, but their strange affinity for one another had never been in question. That did not, however, prevent Mr Bennet from disturbing his wife’s nerves at every opportunity.

“Oh, Mr Bennet!” Frances Bennet tittered, blushing. She then danced out of her chair, and took Jane’s hands, twirling about the room. “Five thousand a year, and very likely more! What jewels! What pin money! ‘Tis as good as a lord!”

“Why must he marry Jane, Mama? I am sure we should all like to have our chance with Mr Bimsby,” asked Kitty, followed by a fit of coughing.

“Oh Kitty, hush, who wants to marry a girl who does nothing but cough, you vexing child! You should be grateful that your sister is so beautiful; Lord knows, it cannot be for nothing. She will improve all of your fortunes, and you should be grateful,” Mrs Bennet admonished.

“I am certain that if the gentleman selects a lady from Meryton, that she will be all that is lovely and worthy,” said Jane serenely as she clipped her thread with a pair of tiny silver scissors gifted to her by her father on her sixteenth birthday, which she carried on a long chain about her neck so as to prevent their loss. “All my sisters are lovely, and this new gentleman would be fortunate if he were to earn the affection of any of them.”

Mrs Bennet declared that they would all be the death of her poor nerves. Mr Benson was intended for *Jane*; it was already decided in her mind. The business of her life was to get her

daughters married, and Jane was her greatest hope. Once *she* was well married, she would be in a position to help her sisters.

* * *

MR *BINGLEY* ARRIVED amidst a cloud of gossip. Some houses had heard the party would arrive with five ladies and twelve gentlemen, and others insisted it was seven ladies and ten gentlemen. This was far too many ladies to satisfy the female population of Meryton. It was not that the residents were unfriendly, but enough competition existed for husbands. . A large party of gentlemen would be a boon for the ladies of the village, particularly if they arrived in time for the assembly.

It was Mr Bennet who dashed his wife's hopes for a such a party of single men. The visit had been undertaken, as demanded. Mr Bennet had it under good authority – from Mr Bingley himself – that he was to travel to London, and return directly with two ladies, and two other gentlemen. Two of the party were already a married couple, so there would be only two single gentlemen to be fought over by the ladies of the village.

Mr Bingley had promised to make every effort to return in time for the assembly, and so there was a great rush to the haberdashery for shoe roses, evening gloves, ribbons, and every other manner of adornment that might distinguish a lady from her companions. The Bennet sisters assisted one another, as usual, though Mrs Bennet did Jane's hair herself. Lydia was better with coiffeurs, although no one dared test their mother's nerves by telling her this. One might have thought there was only one daughter in the house, so much attention was paid to her eldest. The other girls did very well on their own, and with each other's help. None of them, save Jane, and Kitty, who always wished for her mother's attention and received but little of it, had the temperaments to be fussed over by their mother, in any case.

Mr Bennet proved correct when the Netherfield party entered the Meryton Assembly Hall, and the party only included the five promised guests. He did his duty in introducing the young man to his family, then took himself off

to the card room. Mr Bingley was handsome and gentlemanly, recommending himself to everyone with his pleasing features and guileless manners. He was determined to be pleased, and so he was. No one could take exception to his address. He acquainted himself with everyone in the room of any note in a trice, though not before making promises to stand up with Charlotte Lucas for the first dance, Jane the second, and Elizabeth the third. He declared himself grieved that the ball ended before midnight, and the entire room was in agreement that he was a genial and capital gentleman whom everyone in Meryton would be happy to know better, particularly Jane Bennet.

The better looking of his two male companions, Mr Darcy, drew the attention of the room quickly with his height and handsome features. He wore black, but it did not look severe on him. If anything, he was exceedingly elegant, and carried himself with a noble bearing. He was much admired for some part of the evening, until his dedication to holding up the wall and ignoring the ladies led the company to decide that he was proud, above his company, and not worth the trouble of knowing.

The third gentleman was hardly worth mentioning. Mr Hurst was a florid-faced man who took himself off directly to the refreshments, and then the card room. The two ladies were keenly observed by the others in the ballroom as well. They were both expensively dressed, and the older of the two, Mrs Hurst, looked particularly fine, but her sister Miss Bingley, though also expensively attired, looked as if she had done so in the dark. The orange of her gown clashed terribly with her complexion, which, paired with any other colour, might be quite striking. She wore a *turban* of all things, a rather heavy looking one, and looked like someone that one of the society columns in the newspapers might draw a parody of.

Sometime after the fourth set, Mr Darcy stood in his usual position against the wall, when his friend approached him. "Darcy!" exclaimed Mr Bingley. "I cannot abide seeing you stand about in such a stupid manner. You had much better dance!"

“I will not do any such thing. You know how much I dislike the activity, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner,” Mr Darcy responded.

“Darcy, you know I must have the goodwill of my neighbours if I am to do well here; you simply must dance,” Bingley chided. “Besides, I have never met with so many pretty girls in all my life!”

“*You* are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” Darcy growled at his friend. Miss Bennet was indeed stunning, he allowed to himself. If you liked that sort of statuesque, obvious beauty. The lady was so serene that Darcy was unsure if he had seen her speak ten words to his friend all evening. Darcy preferred a more open nature in a female, since he could not tell if they were planning to trap him if they rarely spoke.

“Miss Bennet is an angel...” sighed Bingley. “But there is her sister sitting down just there. Allow me to obtain you an introduction.”

“Who do you mean?” asked Darcy, turning his head briefly and not truly even looking. “She is barely tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me. You had better return to your partner, and enjoy her smiles. I am in no humour at present to give consequence to ladies who are slighted by other men.”

“I believe she sits out two voluntarily, so other ladies might have the opportunity to dance. Men are thin on the ground, if you have not noticed. I believe Miss Bennet will sit out the next. Each of the more popular ladies here takes a turn or two doing so. It is uncommonly kind of them to be so considerate of their friends, if you ask me.” Bingley refused to leave Darcy to his reflections, and insisted that he join Bingley and Miss Bennet in conversation until the next dance. “You must at least have some conversation, Darcy,” he hissed. “I never show *you* to such disadvantage when I am *your* guest.”

Darcy berated himself as he followed his friend. Bingley was correct. Perhaps it *was* good of Darcy to introduce Bingley to his society, but Bingley never shamed him. Bingley was every hostess’s dream guest. Friendly, obliging, willing to

dance and be merry, and it was possible to sit him next to nearly anyone without difficulty at dinner. Just because it was his friend's natural disposition did not change the fact that Bingley was a good friend, and Darcy must strive to show him to the best advantage. He deserved that much.

Mrs Bennet lost no time in approaching them as they joined Miss Bennet, and monopolised the conversation. Another of her daughters approached them, looking concerned at her mother's refusal to allow the young people to talk, but Mrs Bennet chattered on about the neighbourhood and the ladies in it, when Mr Bingley announced that their friend Miss Lucas was a most friendly and obliging young woman.

"It is a pity that Miss Lucas is not more beautiful," sighed Mrs Bennet.

"Mama!" exclaimed Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

"Oh Lizzy, you will never admit that she is plain, and I take no pleasure in saying what is obvious to everyone. I do not *wish* her to be so. I am sure I would like to see Miss Lucas well settled just as much as anybody! But it's *my Jane* who is considered the beauty of Meryton."

Darcy observed Miss Bennet's face drain of colour, but her features did not so much as twitch a muscle. She remained entirely serene, but he believed he knew a mask when he saw one. Like himself, here was one who was used to being singled out for attention, and thus never showed her feelings. He hoped his friend would be able to make heads or tails of such a woman. The next set started, and Elizabeth was approached by her next partner.

CHAPTER 2



Miss Bennet refused to let Bingley sit out with her. She insisted that she sat out to give other ladies a chance to dance, and it would give her great pleasure to see him stand up with Miss Goulding. It was indeed an uncommonly kind practice. Darcy could hear Mrs Bennet chastising her soundly for it as he and his friend went their separate ways. Bingley approached another local lady, Miss Goulding, presumably, and Darcy returned to standing at the edge of the room.

I am a stupid ass, he thought to himself. He hoped that it was not too late to redeem his character in the eyes of the neighbourhood. He truly did not have the disposition for dancing unless he knew his partner very well, and was comfortable in their company. He would start with Bingley's sisters, then find someone else who did not appear too terrifying.

Later, when Darcy had danced with Bingley's sisters, he stood in a quiet corner considering which local lady he would approach for a dance, when he overheard two matrons talking from their chairs nearby.

"Such an elegant gentleman! What a fine thing for our girls, Mrs Long, to have such an engaging man come to reside in the neighbourhood!" said Mrs Bennet. For all her progeny's uncommon kindness to their friends, Mrs Bennet seemed like an ill-bred woman with far too many daughters.

"I should think you would wish Miss Bennet to catch the other one," the other woman said. "The one that everyone says

owns the deplorable half of Derbyshire.”

That was a new one. Darcy thought with a smirk. *The deplorable half of Derbyshire.*

“For all my prayers to see my daughters well settled, Mrs Long, I hope you do not think me completely insensitive to their happiness. My Jane is too gentle and kind-hearted to be wasted on some proud, arrogant man who is above his company, and far too stern. Jane deserves a *happy* fellow who will see to her contentment. Make no mistake, they all *must marry*, Mrs Long. *My* portion will not support them, but there is little point in pushing my Jane at a disagreeable man who is certainly not at all likely to pay her any respectable attention anyway.”

Mrs Bennet gave a long sigh. “If I could have but one of my girls happily settled at Netherfield, and all of the others equally well married, I should have nothing to wish for the rest of my days. I am certain that must be the hope of all mothers and even guardians. I know that your worry for your nieces must nearly match my own for my girls, though I hope that you will allow that with five daughters, and under the threat of entailment, that my worries are heavy indeed. How is your Loretta? Is she still visiting her friend in Bath? Did anything ever come from that gentleman in Shropshire?”

The other matron replied that the young lady in question *was* still in Bath, and being courted by a young man from Shropshire with no estate of his own, being a second son, but having been left enough by his mother’s uncle to live the life of a comfortable gentleman. He had a genteel house in a charming village, and about eight hundred a year.

“I would not object to seeing any of my girls in such an establishment, myself,” mused Mrs Bennet. “My sister manages quite well on such an income, and I know she has never regretted accepting my brother Phillips.”

“If I may say so, Fanny, if you would see them accept such a match, you ought to give them some more household instruction,” advised the older woman.

“They are perfectly well educated!”

“I do not criticise, my friend, but I mean instruction in the kitchens,” her friend told her gently. “It is well known that while you are the finest hostess in the county, and your daughters have all been raised to help on the estate as a gentlewoman should, they have had nothing to do with that sort of work.”

“Nor should they!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet.

“But if you do not mind them living in smaller households, you should educate them to such a life. The wives of such men often find themselves helping here and there in the house. I assure you, *I* find it no burden to help with the kneading on baking day,” explained her friend. “And what if one of them marries into the clergy? They have even fewer servants than I keep.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Mrs Bennet answered. “I shall speak to Mr Bennet.”

Darcy thought about what he had heard as he watched the dancing. He had immediately taken Mrs Bennet to be a fortune hunter when he met her, but it seemed that she only wished for her daughters to be happy and safe. This was a much more wholesome sentiment than most matrons in town, who mostly hunted for connections and fortune for their daughters on the marriage mart. The sheer number of young women each year wedded without regard to their feelings or future happiness to lechers, rakes, and bounders for the sake of connections alone was appalling.

Mrs Bennet had immediately dismissed him as too unattainable, too proud, too disagreeable for her daughter’s disposition. He did not think he had ever met a mother who had expressed such a sentiment. As a matter of fact, he had often placed himself just close enough to Bingley’s angels to see how they and their mothers would react to him, and Bingley had found himself well rid of several fortune hunters in this manner. Miss Bennet had not spared Darcy a second glance once introduced to his friend – and her mother – of all people – seemed to have even less interest in his matrimonial concerns.

Darcy could agree with Mrs Bennet on another matter too, he knew from experience that any parent or guardian of a young girl ought to hope against hope that their charges might make a secure and happy match. As the guardian of his young sister, he wished the same thing, fervently. Mrs Bennet might be loud and coarse, but she had true affection for her daughters, and a regard for their welfare that was very endearing. It was obvious that the Bennets were a fine country family. He would think more kindly of Mrs Bennet in the future.

His own father had similar sentiments, and so did his mother. Neither the Darcys nor the Fitzwilliams had been in the habit of marrying down. No Darcy had done so for generations, and George Darcy had been profoundly affected by the misery of his parents. He was genuinely grateful that the woman who completed him had also met his father's requirements.

Lady Anne had fought hard for her family to accept her choice. Thankfully, her brother was on her side, because once their sister Catherine had failed to turn George Darcy's attention to herself, she had turned against him entirely, and had fought against her sister marrying the man. The only reason Anne Fitzwilliam had been permitted to accept was because her father had died, and her brother approved the match. His concession for his sister's happiness had caused a break in the family. The Dowager Lady Matlock had moved to their estate in Scotland, and Catherine did not speak to him nor Anne for some years. Not until she had borne a daughter, and her husband and her mother had died, did she seek reconciliation.

George Darcy and Lady Anne had found great happiness in their match, and always expressed their hopes that their children would do so as well. In fact, Darcy's father had promoted his match to a local gentleman's daughter shortly before he died. Darcy had not been in love with the young woman, but he had liked her very well. His ailing father had expressed a desire to see him wed to a charming girl before he passed, and Darcy might have sacrificed his happiness to see his father content and asked her, but the young lady had caught

scarlet fever and died. Her father had not been poor, but nor had he been rich. The man was a salt of the earth gentleman farmer of perhaps about three thousand a year, just like hundreds of others like him who were the pillars of many local societies throughout England.

It was true that Darcy's disposition was ruined. Being hunted by the cold and often conniving fortune hunters of the ton had jaded him. He never spoke to unmarried ladies or their mamas, he rarely danced, and he never placed himself in any position that could be even slightly compromising. On a dance floor, a lady might pretend to trip and fall, a loose seam might be torn, and one might be compromised in plain sight. Instead Darcy never left the ballroom, though he was rarely caught close to the dance floor. Instead, he remained in plain sight, but leaned up against a wall by himself, where he could not be drawn into trouble. He chastised himself now. This was not a London ballroom. Certainly one might be compromised in the country, but there was far less danger amongst the people here. He cursed himself for his behaviour. If he never engaged with society, then he would never fulfil his parents' dream, and he would never find a partner for himself, nor a friendly and warm confidant for his sister.

He asked Miss Lucas to dance, and then Miss Edwina Long, who seemed petrified of him. At the end, he asked Miss Elizabeth Bennet for the last, which she declined, and then sat out. He was perplexed. The lady had sat out two dances already, and did not look at all like a wilting violet. Acquiring him as a partner for the last dance must be a feather in her cap, yet she did not seem at all enamoured of the idea.

* * *

BINGLEY *DID* DANCE THE LAST, again with Miss Bennet, distinguishing her amongst her companions by selecting only her for a second set. As Bingley led her to the floor, she was quiet. She had been quiet during their first dance, but this seemed different. She seemed embarrassed. When Bingley inquired if he had done anything to cause her discomfort, she said, "Oh no! I am sorry if I made you feel that way... Only... I should not like you to think that my mother is at all

disdainful of Miss Lucas. Her words tonight did not show her to advantage; she did not express herself well. I am certain that my mother meant to convey concern for my friend, rather than any scorn for her looks. Charlotte is very dear to all of us.”

“Your friend is everything that is intelligent and amusing. I am certain that her eventual match will be all that is delightful, and she will be no less happy for having waited for it,” Bingley assured her. “I am acquainted with matchmaking mamas. My own mama’s concern for the daughters of her friends was no less than that she held for my sisters.”

“Charlotte *will* make a delightful match someday, I am certain of it,” breathed Jane in relief that the man did not hold her mother in disdain. “I doubt that I ever shall, but I do wish it very much for my friend.”

“Why Miss Bennet! Whyever should *you* not marry?” gasped Bingley in shock.

“It does not behove me to point out my mother’s behaviour, but you must see that she is desperate. Her intentions are good, and she wishes for all of us to be happy, but her fear of the entail on my father’s estate is strong indeed. She tends to drive gentlemen away rather than the opposite,” Jane said diplomatically.

“Believe it or not, we have something in common,” said Bingley. “My sisters believe that they must approve my match so that it brings them the connections they want. The sort of woman they wish me to wed is exactly the sort of woman I run from, but they frighten away every lady that I even suspect might suit me.”

“Imagine if *your* mother sat in the corner, declaring to all that she expects the gentleman that you only just met will marry you within a fortnight, and then throw your sisters into the paths of other rich men!” Jane exclaimed in laughter.

“Imagine if *your* sisters interrogated every person you danced with, and then told them falsehoods about you being nearly engaged to another woman!” Bingley returned insistently.

“Oh dear. I do hope my sisters and mother would not stoop to falsehoods,” Jane said, turning serious.

“Do not fear, Miss Bennet. I watched you sit out two dances tonight when you could have been enjoying yourself, merely to see your friends enjoy the same. Some gentleman will surely recognize your kindness and goodness, and make you his wife even sooner than the fortnight that your mother dreams of,” Bingley assured her.

Jane frowned. “I do hope not. I would prefer a much longer courtship. I would like to know my husband well before I even consider marriage. I have always hoped for a marriage of true affection.”

“As have I,” Bingley agreed. “You know, these ladies and gentlemen that have fled from our families are terribly short-sighted. There is no need for difficult relations to be an impediment if two people like one another well enough. For of course, unless you marry a local man, you will not be staying in the vicinity, you will go to live with your husband. And my sister Caroline will eventually marry and leave me as well, and when Hurst comes into his inheritance, I suspect I shall see a great deal less of my elder sister. Why should such a temporary situation prevent one’s happiness?”

“I do love my family, though. I should not like to go away and see them no more,” said Jane.

“Nor I, to be sure, but once one is settled at a safe distance, one may choose how often they see their relations, and for how long,” answered Bingley. “And I am certain one would enjoy their visits all the better for it.”

“I have never considered it like that, but you are right,” said Jane. “It is too bad that I may never meet a gentleman with such foresight who has an interest in me.”

“Do not be too certain about that, Miss Bennet,” smiled Charles Bingley, hoping against hope that maybe this time, this courtship, if one indeed progressed, might be different from all those before it.

CHAPTER 3



The following day contained the usual visit to Longbourn by the ladies of Lucas Lodge. By mutual agreement in the little town, calls were not paid the day after an assembly or large event, when some might have other obligations to attend to, or may be resting after the exertions, except by particular invitation. A prior invitation had stood between Longbourn and Lucas Lodge all the years of Mrs Bennet's and Lady Lucas's long friendship, and the ladies relished the opportunity to speak of all that occurred at the assembly.

Elizabeth had heard Mr Darcy's unkind words about her the night before, but said nothing to anyone but Jane. Mrs Bennet disliked the man already. If it was made worse, her mother might actually insult the man to his face, which could not possibly help Jane to develop an attachment to his friend. Not only that, but Mrs Bennet would spread the tale far and wide, and though Elizabeth knew that her mother did not consider her as handsome as Jane, she did not wish to hear the matter spoken of at length by the entire village. She did, however, wish very much to divulge the incident to Charlotte, whose confidence she could depend on, and to exclaim with her friend about how abominable the man was to ask her for the last later in the evening. She had not wished to sit it out, and she received two offers that she had to refuse after the man had gone on his way, but it did give her the great satisfaction of declining his request, and swanning off as if it meant nothing to her.

Indeed, it could have meant a great deal to her if only he had been amiable from the beginning like his friend. Just like Jane had been attracted to Mr Bingley from the start, so too, had Elizabeth been to Mr Darcy. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen, and then when he spoke cruelly of her in her hearing, it had been like being doused with a bucket of cold water. She did not need men like him reminding her that she would never be as handsome as her sister, she needed just one honourable, kindhearted gentleman to think that she was worthy on her own merits.

The Lucas Ladies arrived, and broke up into their prospective groups, Lady Lucas to converse with Mrs Bennet, Maria to gossip and retrim bonnets with Kitty and Lydia, and Charlotte to sit and enjoy Elizabeth and Jane's company. The latter group did invite Mary to sit and converse with them, but she eschewed the conversation as gossip, and retreated to a corner to study Fordyce.

Charlotte was aghast at the report of Mr Darcy's manners. "He did seem above his company when he was first introduced, and while he so persistently stood alone, he looked so proud and haughty. But later, when he asked me to dance, he seemed willing enough to be reservedly friendly, and seemed to spend the rest of the evening making a more sincere effort. Perhaps he was out of sorts."

"It is not like you to sound so much like Jane, Charlotte. How is *she* expected to respond when you steal her lines?" teased Elizabeth.

"But Lizzy, perhaps *he was* out of sorts when he arrived," insisted Jane. "Sister, what if there was some sort of explanation?"

"I cannot imagine what sort of explanation could excuse such incivility, Jane," answered her sister. "In any case, he is unlikely to make any such elucidation to *me*. How was your conversation with Mr Bingley?"

"I think I may have embarrassed *myself* this time," Jane admitted. "You recall that Mama said something unpleasant and embarrassing in his presence. Well... I worried and

brooded over it until the end of the evening, and when we danced the last, Lizzy, I cannot believe I said it, but I said that I did not think I would ever be married with Mama behaving the way she does. I did not intend it to sound like it did. What must he think of me?”

Jane related the rest of the conversation to them – without relating to Charlotte the remark of Mrs Bennet’s that caused the whole scene – only admitting that Mrs Bennet had spoken unkindly and unfairly about someone – and the other two ladies quite agreed that instead of disgusting Mr Bingley, that it sounded like her words had inspired him.

“Do not worry, Jane. I believe you will be married to a handsome, kind gentleman, and living a safe distance from Hertfordshire sooner than you imagine!” laughed Elizabeth.

“Oh Lizzy, do not say it like that, it does not sound how he meant it!” worried Jane. Elizabeth and Charlotte continued to tease Jane lightly, but kindly, for Jane was so soft-hearted, they could never do it with malice.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, Mr Bingley called, accompanied by Mr Darcy, who was determined to give a better impression of himself in the neighbourhood than he had previously done. He vowed to accompany Bingley on all of his calls, not having anything else to do anyway. The ladies of the house refused to pay calls on the locals, and Darcy wished to help his friend retain his good reputation in the neighbourhood.

A walk was suggested, and Elizabeth was volunteered to chaperone, though she had already walked for more than an hour at dawn. Still, of all her sisters, she was the most likely not to tire quickly, and would embarrass Jane the least, so she made the sacrifice for Jane’s sake, to walk behind with Mr Darcy. It was odd, given the way he had insulted her at the assembly, but the man must be exceedingly bored, for he peppered her with questions about herself, punctuated with long, awkward silences.

Elizabeth wondered if the man planned to write her biography, but answered his questions because she could think

of no other alternative. She imagined that he used her answers to shore up an immovable dislike of her, and that he only questioned her to find fault in her answers. These walks and conversations went on for three days before the entire party from Netherfield attended a dinner at Longbourn. Mrs Bennet was an incomparable hostess, and Elizabeth felt proud of her, or would have been, if her mother had not spent the entire evening attempting to bring attention to Jane, who, in turn, acted more and more reserved.

Somehow, they got through the evening, and it seemed as if Mr Bingley had noticed none of it except Jane, but Elizabeth felt certain that his sisters did, for they exchanged many pointed looks over the course of the evening. The two ladies spent the evening behaving disdainfully, as if the food upon their plates was inedible. If it was, the men did not notice, for they ate with relish, even Mr Darcy, who complimented her mother on the pheasant, and said that his cook at Pemberley would be in her debt if her cook would share the receipt. Mrs Bennet blushed, and Elizabeth knew what her mother's favourite topic of gossip would be tomorrow.

The following morning at breakfast, Jane received an invitation to Netherfield. As Elizabeth expected, Mrs Bennet refused Jane the use of the carriage, insisting that the horses were needed on the farm. Poor Jane was obliged to go on horseback, and received a drenching on the way there. The autumn rain was freezing, and by the time she arrived at Netherfield, she had taken quite a chill.

CHAPTER 4



Caroline Bingley was not of a mind to entertain what she saw as a shameless attempt by Jane Bennet to gain attention. Miss Bingley was inclined to tell the butler to close the door in Jane's face, and send her straight back to Longbourn. Mrs Hurst, knowing what such a measure would do to their brother's reputation, had Jane immediately shown to a guest room with a roaring fire, and sent her a gown to wear.

Once Jane Bennet was back downstairs, dry, and in the drawing room, she made every effort to engage in pleasant conversation with Mr Bingley's sisters. Mrs Hurst was willing to be friendly, though Miss Bingley, still steaming over her guest's presumption, was cold and non-committal. Jane, still chilled from the autumn rain shower, began to wonder why she was even there, or whether she should bother to continue with the evening at all. Should she just request a carriage and return home? Finally the butler arrived to announce dinner, and the ladies entered the dining room.

It was as Mr Bingley had described to her. The entire meal was an interrogation from start to finish. Her accomplishments, her dowry, her connections. Jane, who was beginning to feel really unwell, was losing her patience with all of the sisters' questions and innuendo. In a rare moment of pique, she began to consider telling fibs, and making her connections sound ghastly indeed. By the last course, she had heard so many tales about Mr Bingley's conquests in town, and his affinity for Miss Georgiana Darcy that she decided that she would not stay another minute. These women had no

desire to befriend her. They were behaving exactly as their brother said they did with each of his romantic interests, and she had no inclination to pretend a friendship with anyone who did not mean it.

The moment she laid down her fork, she said, "My dear friends, I apologise for my dullness, but the chill from the rain has given me a headache. Might I trouble you to send for my father's carriage? The groom was to follow me later in the evening, when the horses had finished their work on the home farm."

"I wonder that you troubled to go out on horseback at all, Miss Bennet, when it looked for all the world like it should rain," answered Caroline Bingley.

"This is *England*, Miss Bingley, it *always* looks like it will rain," answered Jane serenely, refusing to be ruffled. "If one was to stay in every time the skies were grey, no one should ever leave the house. But I do thank you so much for your hospitality, and I apologise that I am not equal to staying an hour or two in your lovely music room."

* * *

MRS HURST SENT the footman with the order for the carriage, and shortly thereafter, the ladies made their way to the hall. "Miss Bennet, I have no wish to insult you. But you look exceedingly unwell. You should retire upstairs, and stay the night. If you are still feeling ill in the morning, we should be glad to send for the apothecary. Your colour is high indeed, I fear for your health." Mrs Hurst did not like Miss Bennet as a possible match for her brother, but the young lady looked feverish indeed, and she had no desire to be held responsible by her brother if the woman fell severely ill, and his sisters had not extended every hospitality. Louisa wanted Charles to marry someone who would bring better connections to her and her husband, and who would throw Caroline into the paths of rich men, else they should never be rid of their younger sister.

"My dear Mrs Hurst, I would not dream of putting you out. I simply must return home. The journey is not long, and I will rest better in my own bed," Jane insisted.

At this, there was a clatter in the drive, but it was the gentlemen, and not Miss Bennet's carriage. The men entered as Mrs Hurst continued to fret over Jane's appearance, and Miss Bingley argued with her sister, snidely insisting that if Miss Bennet did not wish for their hospitality, that they should not extend it.

"I am relieved, Miss Bennet, that you did not go out in your father's carriage!" exclaimed Mr Bingley as the men entered the hall, removing their wet outerwear. "Just after we crossed the bridge, it fair swept away! I have never seen anything so terrifying!"

"There is another lane, Mr Bingley, between our two estates; it is narrow and dark, but there is no bridge. Our coachman John has travelled it many times, in every weather. I shall be quite safe, I assure you." Jane was not quite as certain as she sounded, but she had endured enough from this man's sisters, and refused to allow them to say she had encroached upon their hospitality.

"Charles, I fear Miss Bennet might be unwell. She was drenched on her way here, and caught a chill, and now she has the headache. Do assist me in persuading her to remain the night, she looks feverish," Mrs Hurst said insistently to her brother. To be rude to the object of his recent attentions in his absence was one thing. Now that he was here, she knew that to be anything other than solicitous in his presence would be unwise. Her brother had been angry indeed that last time Louisa and Caroline had chased away the lady he was courting, and if he withdrew his invitation for her and Mr Hurst to live with him, her husband would be displeased with her.

"Miss Bennet, my sister is correct, you do look feverish! Please, you must stay the night. You could not be so cruel as to go out into the dark, and force me to spend the night worrying for your health and safety."

Jane, feeling rather more obstinate than usual after his sisters' reception of her, was determined to return to her father's house, and it was on the tip of her tongue to insist,

when the pressure in her head suddenly became too much. The room turned white, and she swooned.

The following morning, a letter was conveyed at breakfast to Longbourn that Jane was desperately feverish, and that the apothecary had been sent for. Elizabeth was outraged that their mother's shenanigans had brought Jane to this, and reminded her mother that Jane could not be courted by Mr Bingley if she were confined to her rooms. She then set off across the fields to see to her sister as soon as may be. She arrived at Netherfield Park an hour and a half later, blowsy, and covered in mud, and was shown into the breakfast room.

Caroline and Louisa, who kept town hours, were sitting down to breakfast with Mr Hurst when she was shown in. "Miss Bennet, did you walk here?" exclaimed Caroline.

"I did, Miss Bingley. Most of the population walks a great deal in the country," Elizabeth said patiently.

"But your hem is six inches deep in mud!" Caroline said, scandalised.

"That is why all of my walking gowns are brown, Miss Bingley, because the country is plagued by mud," Elizabeth returned. "Might I be shown to my sister with all haste?"

When Elizabeth entered Jane's room, she was amazed to find Mr Bingley *and* Mr Darcy present, along with Mrs Nichols. "Miss Elizabeth forgive us. I know it appears unseemly, but Miss Bennet is gravely ill, and my sisters are not nurses. I am glad you are here."

The apothecary entered from the dressing room, where he had been washing his hands in the basin before examining Jane. "Miss Lizzy, I am glad you've come. Miss Bennet appears to have contracted the grippe that has lately plagued Netherfield's tenants."

"Oh Jane," Elizabeth said. "You should not have gone to Queenie's with that basket for Twister."

"Do you mean to say there is an outbreak on this estate?" asked Darcy. "Why was Bingley not informed?"

“It is not a severe outbreak, sir.” Mrs Nichols replied. “Only three families so far, but Miss Bennet here *would* insist on bringing a basket and looking in. Miss Bingley was informed, but she gave no orders to send relief.”

“At Pemberley, the master would be informed,” grumbled Darcy.

“To my knowledge, sir, Pemberley has no mistress, or so I am told. Of course such things would be reported to the master, in absence of a mistress,” Elizabeth said. “At most estates, unless the outbreak was severe, relief efforts would fall under the purview of your wife, if you had one.”

“You mean to say that Miss Bennet is ill because she attended my tenants, due to the neglect of my sister?” cried Bingley.

“Of course not, sir. This estate has been neglected for many years. Some of the other women of the area visit your tenants regularly, and do what they can in the absence of a master, but no one had heard that Miss Bingley had not done her duty. Jane visited your tenants because we have known them for many years. Queenie is the local midwife, and delivered all of my mother’s children. Jane would have made the visit in any circumstance,” Elizabeth assured him.

“That does not change the fact that I am the master here now, and I should have known, and done something!” agonised Mr Bingley. “That physician from the next town over that we met last night, Mr what-was-his-name? Darcy? Was it Miller? Should we send for him?”

“No *thank you*, we shall have no bleeding or purgatives for Miss Bennet!” shouted the apothecary in alarm.

When the gentlemen looked shocked by the man’s volume and boldness, Elizabeth explained. “Mr Miller is known for his belief in purging and blood-letting. More of his patients die than not. My mother never allowed him to treat us again after our young brother died from scarlet fever after his attentions. Most of us in the village are content with the care of Mr Jones.”

“Miss Bennet is a healthy woman with a strong constitution, but bleeding her when she has the grippe would finish her off,” Mr Jones insisted. “In the absence of Mr and Mrs Bennet, I must forbid her to be subjected to a procedure they would not approve of in my presence.”

CHAPTER 5



It being so late in the autumn, there was no ice, the ice houses had been empty for months, but there was no shortage of cold water from the wells at this time of year. Darcy and Bingley withdrew, and under the supervision of Mr Jones, Jane's feverish body was bathed in cold water for hours to bring down her fever. Later in the afternoon, Mr Bennet arrived on horseback in response to a message from Elizabeth. He brought a valise of clothes for both daughters, and agreed with Mr Jones that bleeding Jane was out of the question.

"Your mother has taken to her bed in fear for Jane," Mr Bennet said privately to Elizabeth when they were alone with her sister. "I do wish she might be more useful at such a time, Lizzy, but we know her limitations. I do believe that she has learned her lesson about these matchmaking schemes. She was kneeling by her bed when I departed, praying for forgiveness, and promising that if Jane might be spared that she will never attempt any such stratagem ever again."

Mr Bennet and Elizabeth were invited to remain. Elizabeth was amused, because she had no intention of leaving her sister, invitation or no invitation, but she thanked Mr Bingley and resumed her place by her sister's bed. Mr Bennet dined downstairs with their hosts that evening, and Elizabeth maintained her place by Jane's side.

The following morning, Mr Bennet took her place for a time while Elizabeth went outdoors to stretch her legs. It was dawn, and she would not have left Jane for anything, but Mr

Bennet insisted she would make herself ill. She was instructed not to return until she had taken a long walk and broken her fast. She met Mr Darcy on her walk, and he joined her. Elizabeth wondered what he meant by it. It was one thing to cure his boredom by peppering her with questions when he was accompanying his friend on his calls and they were thrown together, but Elizabeth could not understand why he would seek her out without reason. He asked her a great number of questions about her knowledge of the tenants at Netherfield, and said that Bingley had resolved to pay the apothecary fees for all families affected by the little outbreak, and had sent baskets to all of them. His sisters had scornfully refused to visit the households as they ought, and spoke scathingly about Miss Bennet putting herself in harm's way and then exposing her neighbours to illness. Somehow, this did not surprise Elizabeth.

The ladies were not present at breakfast, Elizabeth expected they would be down in a few more hours, as they had been the day before when she arrived. There was little discussion at the table as she ate with her host and his guest. When she had finished, Mr Bingley asked what he could send to improve Jane's comfort. "Her fever has not abated, Mr Bingley, and I would like to see if we can improve it. Also she needs special liquids. Could some boiled water and willow bark tea be sent up with an invalid feeder? Also, a small container of salt, and if a few lemons or oranges can be spared, that will help, I think."

Later, the gentlemen visited while Elizabeth and Mr Bennet were in the room with the apothecary. "Miss Elizabeth, what is that drink you are making?" asked Darcy with interest, watching Elizabeth mix salt in a glass and squeeze some juice from an orange into it, and pour it into the invalid feeder.

"Tis a miracle, is what it is." The apothecary interrupted as he felt Jane's head. "The fever is lower, Miss Lizzy. That is good."

"One day while we were on our way to visit Queenie, there was a boy, a squatter's son, who was near to swooning from lack of food," Elizabeth explained. "When he fell to his knees,

Queenie instructed him to suck on his hand. She told him that your skin has salt in it, and people need salt, and that if you feel giddy, you should suck the salt from your palm. Another time, when Mrs Mather's daughter was ill, I remembered it, and then also remembered reading something about sick people needing lots of clean water, and fruit. I mixed a small amount of salt into some water, and added some juice from some lemons that we were able to acquire from Lady Lucas. We forced a great deal of it down her with the invalid feeder over two days. It seemed to help, but I am unsure. It might have been a coincidence, and it is more likely that it was Mr Jone's attentions that did it."

"It was that drink that did it, I would wager my teeth upon it," Mr Jones insisted. "Ever since, I have carried a lemon and a small container of salt with me in my bag. You must boil the water, mind. The last thing a sick person requires is another infection brought on by dirty water from a public drinking source."

Mr Darcy was impressed by Elizabeth's intelligence and dedication to helping others, not only her own sister, but also her father's tenants, those of her neglectful neighbours, and even the children of poor squatter's families. The men left Elizabeth and Jane with the apothecary and Mrs Nicholls, then spent the day in Bingley's study, where their host took the opportunity to question Bennet thoroughly regarding his knowledge of Netherfield, its tenants, and the surrounding area. After learning that the people on the lands he leased were suffering, Bingley had gotten no sleep, and was now determined to right as many wrongs as he could. He took the opportunity of questioning someone who had a great deal of local knowledge. Bennet seemed to be intelligent, but it was said locally that the man had lost the heart for improving his own estate when his young son, the fourth of his children, had died at the age of five.

Jane's fever lingered for two more days and finally broke. The young woman spent another week at Netherfield convalescing. Her mother visited her the day after she awoke and became lucid, which was the same day her father returned to Longbourn. Mrs Bennet saw Jane alone in her rooms, and

apologised to her for having sent her on horseback, and promised never to do any such thing again to any of her girls. She then went down with Elizabeth and her other daughters to take tea with the Bingleys in the drawing room. The young ladies were full of news about the regiment, which had arrived, and the officers who had so far singled them out for attention. There was soon to be a card party at the home of their aunt, and a party at the home of the Lucases as well. Every household wanted to be among the first to welcome the regiment to the neighbourhood.

“Did you find Miss Bennet well, Mrs Bennet?” asked Bingley, when it was clear that his sisters had no intention of being civil, and making Mrs Bennet feel welcome to visit them again anytime soon.

“Oh no, Mr Bingley!” Mrs Bennet exclaimed. “She is still a great deal too ill to be moved. We shall have to trespass on your kindness a little longer.”

“I would not hear of Miss Bennet being moved!” cried Bingley. “She must stay another fortnight, at least!”

Mrs Bennet was well pleased with this answer, and next, Lydia put herself forward and reminded Mr Bingley of his promise at the assembly to throw a private ball. “And just think of how charming a private ball will be with the militia in the neighbourhood!”

“When your sister has recovered, Miss Lydia, you shall name the very day,” promised Mr Bingley.

Next followed a conversation between Mrs Bennet and Mr Bingley regarding his tenants. She had heard from Mr Bennet that Mr Bingley was attempting to improve their situations, and this led her to telling Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst a bit about this family or that, and what might be done to help certain households.

“I assure you, Mrs Bennet, that my sister and I have little to do with such matters,” said Miss Bingley, with her nose raised high.

“Is that so, Miss Bingley? I *did know* that you were from trade, but I had heard that your family wished to raise their status. I beg your pardon, that was my mistake,” Mrs Bennet apologised.

“I beg your pardon? What is that supposed to mean?” asked Caroline Bingley.

“Well, Miss Bingley, I had heard that you have hopes of marrying into the first circles,” answered Mrs Bennet. “All gentlemen, great noblemen included, have country estates, and some even possess numerous very large properties. If a property is to be profitable, the people who do the work must be looked after, to ensure that they are healthy and thriving, or the estate suffers, and your husband’s wealth will be threatened. This is the responsibility of the mistress of the estate. I did not know this either, when I married my husband, I married up too, you know, my father was a solicitor. But I was fortunate. My mother-in-law taught me what I must know, and I, in turn, passed it onto my daughters. If it *is* true that you wish to marry up, you will need to learn these things, in which case you are fortunate that your brother leased this place, for it is a good opportunity for you to learn along with him.”

“Charles, how *can* you let her insult me like this?” shrieked Miss Bingley.

“I do not understand. Have I been misinformed?” asked Mrs Bennet in confusion.

“No, Mrs Bennet, you have not. It is true that my sisters and I have been raised by the fortunes of my father from trade. My sisters, however, prefer not to be reminded of this,” answered Bingley, amused by his sisters being put in their place so inadvertently by the well-intentioned matron. “Caroline, you should be thanking Mrs Bennet. Many ladies would just as soon cut you as share their knowledge. It is the responsibility of a gentleman’s wife to see to these matters. You can refuse all you like, but that will not make gentlemen wish to marry you.”

“You might find a nice politician who will have you, if being the mistress of an estate does not suit you, Miss

Bingley,” said Mrs Bennet. “My cousin had a season in London, and *she* married a politician. He had no estate, just a handsome fortune, and they spent their whole year in town, entertaining. It suited her well, until she and her husband died of the cholera. However, if you *do* wish to marry a gentleman, and you wish to learn what you must know, you may visit me at Longbourn whenever you wish. I attend estate matters on Tuesday and Thursday, and my daughters would be good enough to introduce you to your tenants, if you should wish to go visiting.”

“I am certain that Caroline and Lousia are very grateful to you for your kind offer, Mrs Bennet,” said Bingley, glaring at his sister.

“Jane and I visit Netherfield’s tenants on the third Wednesday of each month, Miss Bingley,” said Elizabeth, not really expecting to be taken up on her offer. “You and your sister are welcome to join us.”

“Why on earth would one visit someone else’s tenants anyway?” demanded Caroline snidely. “Ought you not mind affairs on your *own* estate?”

“I think what Caroline wishes to say is that you are very good to lend a hand wherever it is needed, Miss Elizabeth,” interrupted Bingley, glaring at his sister.

“Mrs Hurst shall join you,” spoke up Hurst from the corner.

“Mr Hurst, I beg your pardon!” exclaimed his wife.

“No point waiting for my parents to die to begin learning, Mrs Hurst,” her husband insisted. “It is damned good of Mrs Bennet to offer. Mrs Bennet, my wife will be very happy to visit you on a Tuesday or Thursday, just as soon as Miss Bennet has recovered and returned to Longbourn. I am certain Louisa is very interested in meeting the tenants here at Netherfield, Miss Elizabeth.”

Mrs Hurst glared at her husband while Miss Bingley glared at her brother. Mrs Bennet and her youngest three daughters took their leave, and departed, and Elizabeth returned upstairs.

* * *

JANE RECOVERED SWIFTLY after her fever broke. Two days later, she was able to come downstairs after dinner to spend a pleasant hour in the drawing room. Elizabeth saw her into a comfortable chair by the fire, where she was attended solicitously by Mr Bingley, then retreated to a quiet corner with a book. Mr Darcy was writing a letter, while Miss Bingley and Mr and Mrs Hurst played cards. They invited Elizabeth to join them, but she thanked them and declined.

“Do you prefer reading to cards? How singular,” observed Mr Hurst.

“Eliza Bennet despises cards,” said Miss Bingley. “She is a great reader, and has no pleasure in anything else.”

“I deserve no such praise, nor such censure,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “While I do greatly enjoy the written word, I must admit that I take pleasure in many things.”

“What else do you take pleasure in, besides reading and early morning walks?” asked Darcy with interest.

“I enjoy helping my father with estate matters, and visiting our tenants. I also like assisting the rector with church activities, and I do enjoy society. I have been greatly amused at my share of card parties in the village. Tonight, I believe I am too tired for cards,” Elizabeth said, stifling a yawn. “Jane is restless when she’s ill. I have slept little of late.”

“How quaint,” mocked Caroline. “To be satisfied by such simple pleasures.”

Elizabeth had the wit to know when she was being insulted. “Simple though my pleasures may be, having been born a gentleman’s daughter, I suppose one might say I was raised to them, so I am satisfied. *Gently bred* ladies are content with such pursuits.”

Jane was scandalised by her sister’s cheek, but Miss Bingley had *not* the wit to know when she was insulted. The rest of the room did, and Charles was fit to burst in his effort not to laugh. Mr Hurst was smirking, and even Darcy was hard put to fight the turn at the edge of his lips.

“We shall have to assign a maid to sit with your sister tonight, Eliza. We want you to have your strength so you may return directly to these charming endeavours as soon as may be,” sneered Miss Bingley

“Do not trouble yourself, *Caro*,” Elizabeth replied. “I expect that my sister and I should return home to our father’s estate quite soon. A night in my own bed shall soon set me to rights.”

“*Caro*?” Miss Bingley echoed.

“Oh, had we not reverted to given names, Miss Bingley?” Elizabeth said, impishly. “Of course I do not *recall* having invited you to use mine, but I must have done at some point, or I am certain you never would have presumed.”

“I do not prefer *Caro*,” Miss Bingley snapped, irritated to be reminded that as the higher rank as a gentleman’s daughter, Elizabeth must be the one to extend such an invitation.

“I do apologise,” replied Elizabeth with a smile, “I do not prefer to be called Eliza, so perhaps we have that in common.”

“I have heard Miss Lucas call you Eliza,” interjected Mrs Hurst.

“Ah, the privileges of lifelong friendship cannot be set aside,” Elizabeth quipped. “But since neither of us cares for such familiarity amongst those we do not know as well, I believe we should continue on with our surnames, do not you, Miss Bingley?”

“Indeed,” sniffed Miss Bingley.

At this, Elizabeth noticed that her sister looked weary, and Mr Bingley noticed as well, just at the same moment. Though Jane objected weakly, Elizabeth bundled her back up to her room, where they remained for the rest of the evening. Jane came downstairs for slightly longer periods each day for the rest of the week, and then requested the use of Mr Bingley’s carriage to return home, for, in direct opposition to her recent promise, Mrs Bennet was finding excuses not to send her husband’s carriage.

CHAPTER 6



“I hope, my dear, that you have ordered a good dinner today,” said Mr Bennet at the breakfast table a few days after Jane and Elizabeth’s return to Longbourn. “For I have reason to expect an addition to our family party.”

“Whoever can you mean, Mr Bennet?” inquired his wife. “I know of no one who is expected unless Charlotte Lucas drops in, and I do hope my dinners are good enough for *her*. She certainly does not see such fine fare at her mother’s table. Or perhaps Mr Bingley! What dreadful luck! There will not be a bit of fish to be had. Ring the bell, Mary; I must speak with Hill.”

Mr Bennet smiled wickedly. “It is not Charlotte, nor Mr Bingley, though I give you leave to invite them both as often as you please. No, it is a person I have never seen once in the whole of my life.” This naturally roused a great clamour of interest by his wife and all five of his daughters, and so, well pleased to have their undivided attention for once, he settled back into his chair with his coffee to relate the information to them. “I received this letter about a month ago, and about a fortnight ago, I sent a reply, considering it a matter of some delicacy, and requiring prompt attention. It is from my cousin, Mr Collins, who, if you recall, when I am dead, may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases,” he finished mischievously.

“Mr Bennet pray do not talk of that odious man coming here! I cannot bear to hear such a person mentioned. It is the hardest thing in the world that your estate should be entailed

away from your own girls! Lady Lucas quite agrees, you should have done something about it!” Fanny Bennet wailed.

Thomas Bennet agreed with his wife that it was an abominable situation, but advised her to hear the letter, for perhaps her opinion might change upon meeting the man. Mrs Bennet declared that this was hogwash, and decried the man as a villain for existing at all. Mr Bennet, however, insisted upon reading the letter aloud.

HUNSFORD,

Near Westerham, Kent,

DEAR SIR,

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have had the misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts, lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with anyone with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance. My mind, however, is now made up on the subject, for having received ordination at Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her ladyship, and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England.

As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds, I flatter myself that my present overtures are highly commendable, and that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch. I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it – as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible

amends – but of this hereafter. I shall write no more of my hopes, but assure your daughters in the most complimentary terms that I come prepared to admire them. If you should have no objection to receiving me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, November first, by four o'clock, and shall probably trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday night following, which I can do without any inconvenience, for Lady Catherine is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided that some other clergyman is engaged to do the duty of the day.

I remain, dear sir, with respectful compliments to your lady and daughters, your well-wisher and friend,

William Collins

“And so, my dear, we shall have the honour of receiving this peacemaking gentleman at four o'clock,” finished Mr Bennet, folding the letter and slipping it into his pocket. “I am certain that you will find him to be an invaluable acquaintance.”

“Can he be a sensible man, Papa?” Elizabeth asked.

“I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse,” her father answered her. “Though just because he does not sound particularly intelligent does not mean he is a bad man. It will certainly not do us any harm to be on good terms with him.”

“The letter is not defective in composition. The offering of an olive branch is not particularly original, though it is well expressed,” said Mary. “He sounds as if he has good intentions, and that is what is important.”

“One must wonder by what means he intends to make amends to us, though it is to his credit that he wishes to do so,” remarked Jane.

“It is perfectly obvious, is it not, Mr Bennet?” asked Mrs Bennet. “The gentleman states plainly that he is prepared to *admire you*. He is a single man, with the patronage of a great lady, and the expectation of a gentleman’s inheritance. He has a living already, and at his age, too! He cannot be more than

what, Mr Bennet, five or six and twenty? He was but a babe, I remember you telling me, when we wed. To have a comfortable living, already," she marvelled. "It is perfectly obvious that the man comes in want of a wife."

Elizabeth and her sisters argued with their mother, but nothing they said would spoil her excitement. Mr Bennet, content with his morning's work on his wife's nerves, winked at his second daughter and took himself off to his book room, as his wife rushed from the breakfast room, shouting, "Hill! Hill!" Elizabeth shook her head as he went, wishing that her father had given them even one more day's notice. Now the girls would spend the day running up and down the stairs preparing the house at Mrs Bennet's hysterical direction.

* * *

THE GENTLEMAN WAS EXTREMELY PUNCTUAL, and arrived precisely at four o'clock. The family greeted him in a friendly manner, and he responded in kind. It was obvious that the man was utterly ridiculous, but in a harmless way. He was slightly heavier than one might wish in a young gentleman, but there was nothing disgusting about him. His appearance looked slightly unkempt, but the attention of a caring wife ought to put such matters to rights. Elizabeth certainly had no interest in him – she required some intelligence in her future partner – but her younger sisters might prefer a silly husband, as others had done before them. Elizabeth had heard a few of the local matrons whispering that such men might be irritating, but they could be easily led.

Mrs Bennet immediately ended the man's attentions to Jane, and he instantly settled upon Elizabeth next. Elizabeth spent the evening rebuffing him, only for him to continue on in his stupidity. He took tea in the parlour briefly with the family, enjoying more cake than was good for him, then retired to his room to change and rest after his journey. Dinner was a misery, and though Mary attempted to interest him in a discussion of theology, he barely noticed her. After dinner, he read from Fordyce for nearly two hours, not noticing that his only audience was Mary. Mr Bennet had abandoned them for his book room, Mrs Bennet was nodding off, and Kitty and

Lydia were dead asleep. Elizabeth and Jane were pretending to be attentive, but each was off in her own world, until finally the man snapped his book closed, and Mrs Bennet hastily bid them all a good night, waking the younger girls, and herding them upstairs, as her other daughters followed.

As they went up to bed, Elizabeth pulled Jane by the elbow quietly, and followed Kitty and Lydia into their room. “Whatever do you want, Lizzy, you never come in for a chat,” said Lydia in surprise.

Elizabeth spoke, “Tomorrow morning you are going to bring your best dresses to Mary’s room, and finally, we are going to give her the assistance she needs in learning what colours and styles suit her best. We should have done it long ago, really.”

Lydia laughed, “La, Lizzy, as if I’d let plain old Mary wear my gowns.”

“You will, *and* you will allow her to until Mr Collins proposes, or Mama buys her new gowns,” Elizabeth insisted.

The two went back and forth for a few moments, with Lydia declaring that she planned to marry first, and would not help with the scheme.

“Lydia Harriet Bennet, do not be a silly child,” Elizabeth scolded. “Of course it does not matter which of us marries first. We are none of us rivals. The heir to our home is here, and one of us actually *wishes* to be courted by him! May I point out that if Mary is unsuccessful, Mama is going to insist one of us attempts to catch him. You and I are the most likely to be the focus of that endeavour, Kitty, and may I point out that we are both eminently unsuitable for it. If one of us actually wants to marry him, the rest of us should assist her by any means necessary. It is unlikely that *all* of us will be able to marry for love or inclination, so we ought to be helping each other when the opportunity presents itself for any of us.”

Kitty then demanded that Lydia do as Elizabeth bid. When Lydia objected, Kitty was insistent. “I will not be sacrificed to that man by Mama just because you are not willing to help Mary. You will help us in assisting our sister and her potential

savior in the morning, or I will tell Papa you were too immodest and forward with the officers when we met them in the village last week, and that you ought to go back into the nursery.” Elizabeth was impressed. As far as sibling extortion went, that was a very good threat.

“Lydia, Kitty follows you in everything, so if she went to Papa with concerns of your behaviour, he would be very likely to take notice,” said Jane.

“In any case, Lydia, it is good that you will be helping, because you are the best at discovering the most becoming colours and styles. Just do not become too excited. Mary will still want to be modest in her attire. We must help her find becoming colours and styles that need minimal lace or embellishment because if we make her feel like a spectacle, she will balk,” Elizabeth rationed. “And you must be kind to her. She is in a distressing time, and does not need your teasing or cruel words. If you want us to come together to help you when you need it, then you must do so for us, Lydia. This is supposed to be what sisters are for.”

Lydia, placated by the compliment of being the best at fashion, began an animated discussion with Kitty about which of their gowns would be right for Mary, and what bonnets they could pull apart to match them. Elizabeth and Jane went to Mary’s room next.

“Are you well, dearest? We could see that you would welcome Mr Collins’ attentions, so we are here to help,” said Jane as she sat next to Mary on her bed.

“It matters not whether I would, since he has selected Lizzy already,” answered Mary listlessly.

“Mr Collins is the type of man who has no idea what he wants, and must be led there. He will be yours if you want him, Mary. If it is the last thing I do, he will. Tomorrow morning, Kitty and Lydia will help us find you some pretty new gowns to wear. Jane, who is as skilled with hair as Lydia, is going to help you find a new style that suits you. After breakfast, I shall suggest a walk into town, where we shall all go except you, Mary, who will stay home to practise your

accomplishments. During the walk, I will make certain of Mr Collins' regard for you. I predict that by the time we return home, he will be quite ready to court you," Elizabeth declared.

"Lizzy, I will not allow Kitty and Lydia to paint me like a doll. That is vanity and it's a sin!" exclaimed Mary.

"Mary, The Lord is not going to be angry with you for wearing yellow. He made you beautiful, and I am sure will not approve of you hiding it under grey gowns and spectacles you do not need. It is not necessary to get too excited with ribbons and lace, but there is nothing wrong with wearing shades that go well with your colouring," Elizabeth rebutted. As Mary made to argue again, Elizabeth burst out, "For heaven's sake, Mary, do you believe that Jane is vain or wicked?"

"Well no, of course our Jane could never be so," faltered Mary.

"Well as you know, *our Jane* is the loveliest of us all, and she does not hide under grey gowns. Do you believe she is vain or wicked because she knows she looks well in blue, and wears it often?"

"Of course not! Jane, I would never think that!" cried Mary. "I did not consider it that way."

"Of course you did not, Mary," soothed Elizabeth. "So you see, if Jane can be lovely, and not wicked or vain, then you can be also. We shall be visiting your room very early tomorrow morning. I predict that Mr Collins will return from our walk into Meryton quite ready to know you once his path has been illuminated for him. Then it will be up to you, and we shall help you any way we can," Elizabeth promised.

CHAPTER 7



The next morning all five Bennet girls could be heard giggling in Mary's bedroom. An hour later, Mrs Bennet's jaw dropped and Mr Bennet nearly choked on his tea as their girls sailed into the breakfast room with a glowing, yet still simply attired Mary Bennet, who was completely transformed in Elizabeth's favourite pink gown, with the addition of a modest fichu, and with her hair in a soft yet elegant twist accomplished by Jane. Kitty had assisted nobly by *accidentally* dropping Mary's silly, useless spectacles, and breaking them under her foot while assisting with Mary's hair.

Mr Collins continued his attentions toward Elizabeth throughout breakfast, but Elizabeth continually referred his attention back to Mary, who engaged him quite agreeably about scripture. Towards the end of the meal, Elizabeth invited Mr Collins to escort his cousins into Meryton. When his acceptance was assured, Mary announced that she would remain home to practise the instrument for, "No excellence can be achieved without constant practice!"

"My dear cousin, that is just what my esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh always says!" exclaimed Mr Collins. Mrs Bennet, not having caught on to the plan, scolded Mary for her silliness, and shooed the other girls and Mr Collins out the door.

Elizabeth took her cousin's arm companionably as they began their walk. "How clever you are to fall in with me so quickly, Mr Collins, for I am the Bennet sister who can assist

you most in achieving your goal, and I am feeling distinctly chatty this morning,” Elizabeth said mischievously as they followed Jane, Kitty, and Lydia down the lane toward Meryton.

“My goal?” asked Mr Collins in awe at her sudden familiarity.

“Your goal to secure a mistress for your lovely parsonage of course! You said yourself that your most esteemed patroness desires you to wed, and indeed is it not a truth universally acknowledged that a young man with a comfortable situation and such excellent prospects as yours, must be in want of a wife?” returned Elizabeth.

“Oh, well yes indeed, of course,” said Mr Collins.

“*Of course*, and for you to have such luck as to have already gained the good opinion of such an excellent lady! You will be very successful as a gentleman when you return one day to take over Longbourn, for your lady is well liked and respected in Hertfordshire, and will guide you well when the time comes. What a fortunate circumstance! Your good fortune is to be wondered at, sir!”

Mr Collins stared at her with awe, and a small amount of apprehension. “It is?”

“I am certain my sister Mary’s delicate reaction to your introduction yesterday was too marked to be mistaken,” Elizabeth said wistfully, dreamy eyed. “The moment I observed her when you entered the house, I knew then that Mary had singled you out as the companion of her future life.

“And how could she not, when you are quite Mary’s ideal partner in every way? Mary has always been the most devout of us, and the most hopeful of joining a kind and hardworking husband to share in the service of a good parish. She studies so diligently at Fordyce! I know she feels keenly the absence of someone to guide her in the understanding of those teachings that we – the unordained – are ill equipped to mentor her in. How happy will Mary be in such a situation!” Elizabeth went on merrily. “I confess, I am overjoyed for my sister,” she said, wiping away an imaginary tear.

Mr Collins seemed to be at a loss for words for the first time since arriving at Longbourn. “Miss Mary did seem quite attentive as I read from Fordyce last night, and asked for my explanation of several important points. And I very much enjoyed my discourse about the Golden Rule with her this morning at breakfast.”

“May I share a confidence with you?” Elizabeth said quietly, looking about as if she could be overheard out on the lane. “Mary is quite a beautiful girl. Her beauty is rather the opposite of Jane’s. If Jane is tall and blonde like the Princess Cinderella in the fairy stories, then Mary is the petite, ivory skinned, raven haired beauty, like Snow White. But our mother calls Jane’s charms to attention so much that Mary, who is shy, modest, and eschews vanity, hides her light under grey gowns and a severe hairstyle, so as not to attract Mama’s attention and cause her embarrassment.”

“It is to her credit that she turns away from vanity. We must all be vigilant not to allow vanity to overcome us, but such a young lady should not hide her virtues. She appeared much less severe this morning,” said Mr Collins thoughtfully.

“I have always hoped that if one day a gentleman showed her some respectful and genuine attention, she might blossom. So we sisters ambushed her this morning, and insisted she try something new; I believe the effect was quite worthwhile. If you chose to court her, you will have the support of all her sisters, sir,” Elizabeth replied. “And indeed, how can you fail, when you have me to tell you her favourite flowers, and help you along?”

“Why would you help me marry your sister? Many women would have sought to claim their father’s heir over her younger sister,” Mr Collins asked.

“Oh, I could never accept a gentleman one of my sisters had hopes for. I would rather push for Mary’s happiness than mine. Besides, Mr Collins, as you can imagine, there is one element that is sadly lacking at Longbourn, and that is brothers. Not because of the entail, but because we all of us would have valued the kindness and protection of a good brother, and my parents would have felt the same. But it has

occurred to me that with four sisters, if all of us marry, I shall one day have four brothers! But I believe you shall be my favourite, for you will have been my very first brother. That is, if you propose and marry faster than Jane and her suitor. I would never suit as a parson's wife; I am too opinionated. Your Lady Catherine would quite despair of my obstinate, headstrong ways, I am sure. Her ladyship would be offended indeed when I removed all the shelves from the closets! How else should I hang my gowns! I cannot bear to be managed, I must have my own way in most things. But I *will* support my sisters and family as best I can. And certainly you will benefit as well, for you have never had sisters, and if you marry Mary, you shall have four of us!"

"Cousin Elizabeth, you are too good! A more kind and generous cousin and sister never lived! Please, tell me everything about Miss Mary. What is my fair cousin's favourite flower? Does it grow in the gardens at Longbourn?" Mr Collins began peppering Elizabeth with questions as they entered the haberdashery.

Elizabeth spent the rest of the outing telling Mr Collins everything there was to know about her next younger sister, and by the time the party returned to Longbourn, Mr Collins was head over heels in love with Mary. The idea that a lady actually was interested in *him* was nearly more than the man's excitement could bear. He had arrived thinking that he would be lucky if one of his cousins would consent to have him in order to save their home for their family, and somehow, one of them actually *liked him*.

As they entered the house, Mr Collins went immediately to the music room, and said, "Cousin Mary, I have recently been studying a new book of sermons, and it has several points I would be vastly interested to hear your thoughts on. If I were to fetch it from my trunk, would you like to sit in the garden and discuss it with me?"

Mary blushed happily, and agreed; Kitty offered to accompany them, for she wanted to sketch a section of the garden that had recently been redesigned.

“Mr Collins! I was quite set on taking tea with you in the parlour. Lizzy and I are *vastly* interested to hear about the renovations Lady Catherine made to your charming parsonage,” cried Mrs Bennet, attempting to stop the procession, and throw Mr Collins together again with Elizabeth.

“My dear Mrs Bennet, I shall be very happy to join you for tea, just as soon as Miss Mary and I return from the garden,” Mr Collins promised as Elizabeth caught her mother’s eye and shook her head imperceptibly.

Mrs Bennet waited as Mr Collins left the room with Mary and Kitty, and then rounded on Elizabeth. “What do you think you are up to, young lady? You are up to something, and I will not have it! Mr Collins is interested in you, and you will not discourage him, Lizzy!”

“Mr Collins is no more interested in me than I am him, and there is no reason to push me at him when he and Mary *like each other*, Mama,” Elizabeth responded.

“He- they...”

“Mama, Mary *likes* him. She *wants* him to court her. And it was scarcely the work of a moment to pique his interest in her as we walked to Meryton. I have promised to advise him on his courtship, and by the time we returned home, he was half in love with her already!” Elizabeth replied.

“Lizzy, how clever of you!” Mrs Bennet clapped her hands. “Your father always promised me that you could not be so clever for nothing! Now to help Mary, we must go into the village tomorrow, and get some lace, and visit the dressmaker, and-”

“Of course I am clever, Mama. I am Papa’s daughter, am I not? Let us settle down, Mary needs no help- no,” she insisted as her mother began to argue about lace. “Mary is being assisted by *her sisters*. I’m sure you’ve noticed that she already looks very well today. It was not easy to find simply cut gowns among our wardrobes with minimal embellishments, and we worked very hard with Mary to select a number of our frocks that she feels comfortable and pretty

in. If you make a spectacle of her or her courtship, you know she will withdraw entirely.”

Mrs Bennet made to argue again, and Elizabeth said, “Mama, you have spent twenty-two years teaching us to catch husbands. This is the moment you have trained us all for, and now you must give your girls some credit, and trust us to get the matter right. Have we not already made an excellent beginning? Let Mary attend to her affairs, and allow her sisters to help her. I promise you that I have every confidence that we shall hear a proposal very soon indeed!”

After Mary and Mr Collins had spent a pleasant hour in the garden, and another hour was spent taking tea with Mrs Bennet in the drawing room, hearing about his parsonage and the patronage of the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Elizabeth and Mary went to the kitchens, assisted the cook with dinner, and prepared a special pudding. Mrs Bennet had always disapproved of the girls spending time in the kitchens, but after her conversation with Mrs Long, she had encouraged the older girls to learn some basics in the kitchen, and teach their younger sisters, in case any of her daughters chose to marry down.

Each of the girls had found something they were good at in the kitchens over the last few weeks. Jane had learned one or two savoury courses, and was interested in learning more. Elizabeth was becoming good at baking, but not at all at the decorating of cakes and puddings. Mary found interest in savoury dishes, like Jane, and they learned that with little practice, Mary was extremely skilled at decorating cakes and other puddings with icing, sugared flowers, and the like. Lydia and Kitty were very enthusiastic about learning to bake bread, and were learning to make braids, and other attractive and appetising loaves. The cook had some fish and a beef roast; Elizabeth helped with some of the vegetables, while Mary decorated a lovely pudding for the end of the meal.

Mr Collins’ praise was generous at dinner. He spoke unendingly, and complimented everything from the tablecloth to the dishes upon the table. “I must say, Mrs Bennet, you set a remarkably fine table. I might be at Rosings Park right now,

with such a meal before me. To which of my fair cousins should I compliment the excellence of the cooking?"

"Longbourn is perfectly able to keep a cook, Mr Collins," said Mrs Bennet. "But my daughters and I believe that it is necessary for a lady to have some simple skills, and so they have recently begun to help in the kitchens. For example, today Lizzy assisted with the vegetables, and Mary decorated the pudding, which is a talent she only recently acquired, but has learned with distinction."

"Indeed, and Cousin Elizabeth, what excellent boiled potatoes! It has been many years since I enjoyed such an exemplary vegetable! I am all anticipation for the pudding. I am sure my fair cousin Miss Mary will have designed a confection fit even for Lady Catherine!" enthused Mr Collins as Mary blushed.

"Mary has recently discovered a gift for the culinary art and housekeeping. She is learning so quickly in the kitchens. She will be quite the charming homemaker one day when her time comes, so very accomplished! I am quite in raptures at her little design for a table that she is saving for when she marries," Elizabeth replied to him.

The pudding was brought out and praised by all, to which Mary blushed again deeply. At the end of the meal, the sexes did not separate, and Mr Bennet challenged Elizabeth to a game of chess in the drawing room. Mary played the piano quietly in the corner, a low, easy tune that was the perfect background for the quiet conversations happening in the room. Mr Collins settled down close by her to enjoy her playing, and make notations in the book of sermons from earlier that day, so that he and Mary could discuss it in more detail. Jane worked on her embroidery, while Lydia, Kitty, and Mrs Bennet began looking at fashion plates, Mrs Bennet looking over at Mary and her suitor surreptitiously every few moments. She seemed to have decided to leave the management of the courtship in Mary and Lizzy's hands for the present, since it seemed to be developing splendidly..

"However did you manage that?" asked Mr Bennet, nodding to the couple in the corner.

“It was easy to see yesterday when Mr Collins arrived that Mary wished for his attention. Lydia and Kitty were persuaded to assist with her wardrobe, and it was scarcely the work of a moment to make her interest known to him, and welcome him to the family as my future brother.”

“Nice work,” grinned Mr Bennet. “Somehow you have even made your mother fall in line.”

“What point is there of forcing my cousin and I together if he and my sister have already discovered an affinity for one another? I would never accept a suitor that one of my sisters had hopes for under any circumstances.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at the thought. “I sense that Mr Collins is rather lonely with no family of his own. He may be rather silly, but there seems to be no malice in him. He is insensible, but harmless, rather like Mama. He has made several remarks that make me believe that he is quite alone in the world, and would like to be welcomed to the family as a close connection. Indeed it could only be beneficial to everyone if we were to do so.”

“You make a fair point. While he may not be a sensible man, nor would I relish spending much time with him, there is certainly no reason to be at odds with him. Let us see where matters fall with Mary for now,” replied Mr Bennet. The rest of the evening passed comfortably. Eventually Mary abandoned the pianoforte, and joined Mr Collins to discuss the book of sermons.

CHAPTER 8



Egypt, 651 AD

CARTAPHILUS STOOD ALONE, contemplating a silent ritual in the moonlight. He stood before the Great Pyramid of Giza, breathing evenly, staring at the point at the top of the temple. A vision washed over him, and whispers of the ancient pharaohs chanted in his ears secrets that have been lost to time.

He stood, rooted to the ground, arms outstretched, whispering the lost knowledge of the great rulers for hours, until the moon disappeared and the sun began to rise in the east.

A pair of travelling scholars passed, first stopping to observe him for some minutes, then moving on, murmuring to themselves. Cartaphilus stood, unmoving, as the men continued to the city, arguing between themselves over whether he had been a real man, or perhaps a spirit from another realm.

CHAPTER 9



The days passed, and the Bennet sisters quite adopted Mr Collins as their brother. He was not present when Mr Bingley delivered his invitation to the Netherfield ball, as he was escorting Mary and the younger girls to the village, which had become an almost daily pastime. Mr Collins came to Elizabeth after he learned about the ball, and confessed to her that he wished to ask Mary for the first and supper sets, but that while he had learnt to dance, he was not proficient, and had no wish to embarrass her. At the same time, he had no wish to hurt her feelings by neglecting to ask her.

Elizabeth recommended that he go and seek out her sister. “You should go to Mary and speak with her. Indeed, you must, if you are to be a good husband, be prepared to humble yourself and bare your shortcomings, and allow her to help you. Indeed she must be able to do the same with you. That is what a true marriage is like. Mary will esteem you all the more, and in her goodness will help you practise before the ball. Indeed, I believe that you will find that you have four more cousins here, who will also lend themselves to the cause!” Elizabeth declared.

Collins considered this to be invaluable advice, and thanking Elizabeth profusely, went in search of Mary, who, as Elizabeth predicted, was all generosity and helpfulness. The family spent days with the furniture pushed back and the carpets rolled up. Even Mr Bennet was induced to help make up a proper set with multiple couples. Cousin Collins practised his steps with all of the ladies in the household, including Mrs

Bennet on one merry evening filled with laughter. Collins became more unassuming and good natured than any of the company had expected from him, considering his disposition upon entering Longbourn, and Mr Bennet generously gave his time to assist in the endeavour of helping Mr Collins become more gentlemanly, particularly since it was often such an amusing endeavour. Seeing such behaviour as the Bennets and their friends made Mr Collins understand how different was his usual behaviour from that of other gentlemen.

One afternoon, perhaps a week and a half before the Netherfield Ball, Elizabeth and Jane accompanied Mr Collins to Meryton with their sisters. They separated for a short time, Mary and Mr Collins planning to visit the bookstore, Kitty and Lydia the haberdashery, and Elizabeth and Jane went on an errand for their mother to the butcher. Mr Bingley's calls had continued daily, but Mr Darcy had not lately accompanied him. Mr Bingley informed them that an issue had come up on Darcy's estate, and that Darcy had spent some days enclosed in his study, writing letters. Jane was eager to be alone with Elizabeth, so that she might confide the last conversation she had with their neighbour.

Jane liked Mr Bingley very much. She was unsure whether he had any serious intentions, but he called frequently, and paid her very marked attention. She recalled his remarks about difficult relations not needing to present an obstacle to a courting couple, and she wondered if he meant that he wanted to court *her*, but she certainly hoped that he did. Of course, her mother had not been nearly so difficult lately. Elizabeth had persuaded her that she had trained her girls well, and that she ought to trust them to bring the gentlemen of their choice to heel, and make herself scarce. Young men did not wish to court their future mother-in-law. Mrs Bennet had for years objected to Elizabeth's cleverness, but suddenly, it was as if she had recently changed her mind, and had decided that Lizzy's intelligence would save them all. Mrs Bennet consulted her second daughter about practically everything regarding the gentlemen paying attention to her daughters. It was nearly comical.

After the little group parted ways, Elizabeth and Jane fell into deep discussion, for Jane wished for Elizabeth's advice quite as much as their mother did. Their conversation continued through the little village, and by the time they finished their mother's errand and looked up from the pavement, there were their youngest sisters, making a scene on the sidewalk like a pair of trollops.

"*LIZZY!* Come and meet Captain Denny!" Lydia screeched.

Jane and Elizabeth hurried towards their younger sisters before the scene became any worse. Lydia conducted the introduction between her sisters and Captain Denny, who then introduced them to Mr Wickham. Elizabeth thought to herself that it could only be to his benefit for this man to join the militia, for even though he was quite obviously older than most of the new officers, most of whom were in their early to mid twenties, his handsome countenance wanted only regimentals to render him completely charming. He had not the type of looks Elizabeth usually preferred in a gentleman. She fancied taller men, usually with dark hair and eyes. This gentleman was an inch or two shorter in stature than was average for a man, but his blonde hair, pulled back in a queue, blue eyes, handsome face, and pleasing address seemed all one could wish for in the countenance of a man, and Elizabeth knew that nearly every girl in Meryton over fourteen would be wild about him.

The gentlemen accompanied them through the village until they met with Mary and Mr Collins. More introductions were made, and a great deal of conversation was had, until Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy came upon them on horseback. Elizabeth was astonished by the gentlemen's reaction to one another. One turned red, the other white, and after a moment, Mr Wickham inclined his head slightly and touched his hat. Mr Darcy spun his horse about without acknowledging the greeting, and rode abruptly away. It was a splendid exit, it was a shame that no one but she and Mr Wickham had noted it properly. She suspected that Mr Wickham had not appreciated it as she had done. Mr Darcy might despise her, but there was

still a part of Elizabeth's girlish heart that found him exceedingly handsome.

Mr Bingley noticed that his friend had disappeared, and left to find him. Then, before their party had travelled more than a few steps, they were hallooed by their Aunt Phillips, who extracted their promise, yet again, that they would attend her card party that night. Their aunt was assured, and she extended the invitation to Mr Wickham and Captain Denny as well. Lydia wheedled the gentlemen into returning to Longbourn with them for tea, and the party started back for Longbourn.

As they made their way home, Wickham spoke. "How long has Mr Darcy been in the area?"

"About a month, perhaps. He was not very well received when he arrived, but he seems to have made more of an effort, presumably for the sake of his friend Mr Bingley. Are you acquainted with the gentleman?"

"Indeed, I have been acquainted with his family since infancy. In fact, you could say that I have Mr Darcy to thank for my present circumstances," Mr Wickham answered.

"In what manner, may I ask?" Elizabeth asked curiously.

He smiled at her charmingly. "I was brought up for the church. The church ought to have been my profession, and would have been, if Mr Darcy had not defied his father's last wishes, and given the living that was intended for me to another man."

"How terrible! What could induce him to do such a wicked thing?" Elizabeth cried in shock.

"Jealousy, of course. The late Mr Darcy was my godfather, and he was excessively attached to me. Hoping to be of assistance to me, he sponsored my education, and made an effort to provide for me by bequeathing the best living in his gift. But his son could have borne me better had his father loved me less. When the living fell available, it was given elsewhere."

“Why did you not seek redress through the court? Was there no legal method to help you?” Elizabeth asked in horror. How could Mr Darcy do such a thing?

“There was an informality in the terms that was enough to throw doubt, and give me no hope of assistance from the law.” Mr Wickham shrugged his shoulders and smiled sadly. “A man of honour could not have doubted the intent, but Darcy chose to ignore it. I am sure if the matter became known, he would be publicly disgraced. Still, until I can forget my love for the father, I can never expose the son,” Wickham answered sadly.

“I never imagined Mr Darcy could be so cruel. He is regarded as a proud man among the village. I am surprised that his pride did not prevent such dishonesty, as dishonesty it must be called,” Elizabeth thought aloud.

“Indeed, he *is* a proud man,” agreed Mr Wickham cordially, “but his filial pride would not allow him to admit his father had such a regard for the son of his steward. He has a great fraternal pride as well, which makes him a very careful guardian of his sister, and you will hear him generally cried up as the most attentive and best of brothers, but I fear he has ruined the poor girl.”

“What sort of girl is young Miss Darcy?” Elizabeth inquired.

“I wish I could call her amiable. It gives me pain to speak ill of my godfather’s children,” answered Mr Wickham sadly. “But she is too much like her brother—very, very proud. As a child, she was affectionate and pleasing, and extremely fond of me; I devoted hours and hours to her amusement. But she is nothing to me now. She is a handsome girl, about fifteen or sixteen, and I understand, highly accomplished. I made her acquaintance again last summer at Ramsgate and I was saddened at her arrogance. Her father would have been so disappointed.”

At this, the conversation ended, for they had arrived at Longbourn. As expected, Mrs Bennet was delighted with Mr Wickham, and the officers were invited for dinner the

following day. That night, the young ladies attended their aunt's card party, as promised, and then four days later, the party at Lucas Lodge.

* * *

THE HOUSE WAS full of cheerful activity in the final days leading up to the ball. Mary and Mr Collins continued to spend time on their own while being discreetly chaperoned. Elizabeth was vigilant in ensuring that their time together was not interfered with, especially by their mother. She observed that the more time Cousin Collins spent with the Bennets, and the more welcoming and affectionate they were to him, the less ridiculous he became. Mr Bennet noticed as well, and made a point to talk to the young man, welcome him to the family, and then discreetly point out to his young cousin that he had not been raised as a proper gentleman, and ought to learn a bit before his time to become one came, so that he would be as successful as possible.

Mr Bennet made a point to visit Mr Babcock, the Longbourn rector, with Mr Collins a number of times, and Mary did as well. Between the influence of the older clergyman and his curate who was an estimable young man, and also Mr Bennet and a few of his gentleman friends, Mr Collins began to see how gentlemen of respectable yet modest estates behaved in company, and also how differently other clergymen managed their interactions with others.

Mary did pay a visit to the dressmaker for new gowns just before the Netherfield ball. She had resigned herself to be more open to becoming colours, and modest yet flattering styles, and agreed that it was necessary to return her sister's wardrobes to them. Because she had spent so little on her wardrobe since coming out, Mr Bennet was happy to give her an ample amount to spend on her attire, and assured her that when she married, that she could also be assured of a generous trousseau.

The entire plan nearly came to naught when Mary, upset with Mrs Bennet's nerves, fluttering, and exclamations of lace, and Kitty and Lydia's endless chatter about cuts and styles, became overwhelmed, and declared she had changed her

mind. Mr Bennet intervened and told Mary that too many fashionable opinions would spoil not only her gowns, but her nerves as well, and to select any two of the ladies in their family that she wished to go with her, and that the rest of the household would no longer interfere in the matter.

Mary deliberated, spoke to Cousin Collins about the matter, and then asked Elizabeth, Lydia, and her mother to join her. "Mama, Lydia understands what I like, and is very good at helping me find fashions that are flattering and suit my tastes. Lizzy gives me the courage to make my wishes known. So I am going to ask them to assist me in selecting my wardrobe, but I hope you will accompany us, just to enjoy the outing with me." Mrs Bennet wept a little, then ceased her moaning about lace, and focused upon being pleased to be spending the day with Mary.

CHAPTER 10



The day of the Netherfield Ball was excessively busy for the Bennet household. The servants spent the day heating water for baths, and the sisters spent the day helping each other prepare for the ball. Mrs Bennet was reasonably secure in her third daughter's courtship, now was the time to secure Jane's. Mrs Bennet spent the day flitting about Jane, ensuring that every possible effort with Jane's toilette was made, and the effort was worthwhile. Mr Collins expressed great joy to have the honour of escorting so many lovely ladies with his Cousin Bennet.

Caroline Bingley spared no effort on the affair, and Netherfield was turned out in all its glory. Hundreds of candles lit the rooms, and the flowers from the suppliers in town were stunning. Strands of crystals reflected the candle light, and the ballroom was breathtaking. Miss Bingley was determined that this event would show Mr Darcy what a perfect hostess she was, and inspire him to propose. She spent days hinting that he ought to ask her for the first, to no avail. Mr Darcy never danced the first, and when he finally did, it would make a statement to everyone about his choice.

He asked her for the second, Miss Lucas the third, and immediately after supper, he plucked up his courage and asked Miss Elizabeth for her next available set. Somehow, the lady did not look too pleased, but she accepted. Darcy was tongue tied through the entire set. She needled him about his lack of conversation, which did not help the matter.

“Come Mr Darcy, we must have some conversation,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile.

“Do you converse as a rule while dancing?” he asked.

“No,” Elizabeth answered cheekily.

“No?” he echoed.

“I prefer to be unsociable and taciturn. It adds such flavour to the evening, does it not?” she replied impishly.

“I sense you are chastising me. You are right to, I suppose, for I *ought* to be more open, but it does not come easily to me,” he confessed.

“No?” Elizabeth asked.

“I find myself ill-qualified to recommend myself to strangers. I have not the talent for conversing with those I have never seen before. I struggle to catch their tone of conversation, and appear interested in their concerns, as I see often done.”

“Why is that, I wonder?” Elizabeth asked as they moved with the dance. “Is it perhaps because you will not take the trouble of making an effort?”

Darcy looked chastised. “Probably,” he admitted. “But those who are reserved are often uncomfortable calling attention to themselves. I have noted that your eldest sister seems like such a person. I assume that this may be why the two of you are so close. Your convivial demeanour is the perfect compliment to her reticence. It is thus with myself and Bingley. I often put my foot in it when I am nervous, but his proficiency in conversing with others often eases my path. Though I have been much occupied in correspondence with my steward the last two weeks, I hope that I have made a beginning at being on good terms with my friend’s neighbours.”

Elizabeth thought over what he had said. She had not taken it into consideration that Mr Darcy might be shy. Indeed, he *had* improved in the opinion of the neighbourhood since the Meryton Assembly. It had been noted among the matrons of the town and their husbands that the gentleman, while still

excessively restrained in his speech, paid attention to the conversations of those about him, offered sound and useful advice when appropriate. He had been of small assistance to a number of the residents in Meryton. First, when he heard during a visit to Lucas Lodge that Mrs Long's chicken house had collapsed, he had, the very next morning, sent his grooms and footmen with lumber to build her a new one. He had given several local gentlemen very sound advice regarding troubles they were facing on their estates. He sent a letter of recommendation for Mr Mitchell's third son, which resulted in the young man obtaining a good position as a deputy steward to an estate of great wealth and importance, and one afternoon when out riding, he spotted Mr Goulding and his son struggling with their labourers to dig a drainage ditch. According to Mr Goulding, Mr Darcy had been the first to encourage Bingley to dismount, remove their coats, and roll up their sleeves to assist. A possible storm had been expected, and the completion of the proper drainage had ensured the safety of the field in question. As a result, despite his reserve, Mr Darcy had quietly earned the approbation of the matrons in the little town, and the respect of the gentlemen.

The dance ended as Elizabeth continued her musings; Darcy wondered what she might be thinking, but felt too awkward to ask. He left her with her mother, who exclaimed far too loudly of her expectations for Jane. Elizabeth felt chagrined. Already, her father had humiliated the lot of them when her next younger sister had displayed her talents at the pianoforte for far too long during dinner, making an even worse spectacle of Mary, and appalling everyone in earshot with his cruel words. She spotted Kitty *running* at full speed through the drawing room, brandishing Lieutenant Chamberlain's sword over her head. Why was Lydia not leading this charge? By the time she was seven and her sister was two, Elizabeth had learned that if Lydia was separated from Kitty, and you could not hear her anywhere, that she was probably getting into trouble. This pattern had not changed since her youngest sister's infancy. She scanned the ballroom just in time to see Lydia slip out onto the terrace with Lieutenant Wickham.

She made haste across the ballroom, Charlotte Lucas noticing her hurry, and following hot on her heels. Lydia had just begun to enjoy her fourth kiss from a gentleman, but her first in the moonlight – her first, second, and third having been bestowed upon Lieutenant Denny, Lieutenant Chamberlain, and Lieutenant Saunderson over the last two weeks – when her second eldest sister pulled her out of a shadow on the terrace by her ear.

“Lydia Frances Bennet, how dare you? What on earth do you think you are doing?” Elizabeth hissed.

“La! Don’t be so jealous, Lizzy!” Lydia cried. “Just because I helped Mary select a gown does not mean I have changed my mind about being the first of my sisters to wed! Go away, and leave me be! You are only jealous!”

“How do you plan to be married, when Mr Wickham confessed to me that he has no fortune the very day he met me!” Elizabeth spat out. “He has nothing but his army pay! Is it worth living in a tent for the rest of your life just to be the first to wed?”

Lydia and Wickham, not even having noticed Charlotte standing quietly by a potted fern in another shadow, pushed past her back into the drawing room. Suddenly Lydia pushed the doors closed, and Elizabeth heard a tell tale click as her younger sister locked it.

“Lydia! Lydia Bennet, you open this door immediately!” Elizabeth shook the doorknob violently.

“What a lark!” Lydia trilled behind the door.

Charlotte went around the other corner of the terrace to see if there was another door, and as she did so, Elizabeth heard a smothered shriek, and Charlotte came back as quickly as she had gone.

“Who *was* that?” Elizabeth hissed.

Charlotte only shook her head, and said nothing. A moment later Captain Carter came from around the same corner holding the hand of Miss Edwina Long, whose face was flaming and appeared near tears.

“Charlotte,” the girl said plaintively.

“I saw nothing, Edwina,” Charlotte said firmly, giving the captain a hard glare.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Miss Edwina whispered.

“I know nothing, Miss Edwina,” Elizabeth assured her. “Now compose yourself, or everyone will suspect something when we finally return to the ballroom.”

A moment later, the door opened, to reveal Lydia and Wickham with Mrs Bennet and Lady Lucas. When Lydia spotted the other ladies, she whirled on Wickham, “When you said Captain Carter had just gone around the corner, I thought you meant alone!” The man shrugged his shoulders, unconcerned.

“Lydia Bennet, have you just attempted to *compromise* your own sister?” Lady Lucas demanded.

“As if Eliza Bennet – of all respectable young women – would go anywhere alone with a gentleman,” Charlotte said in derision. “There were any number of us out here as you can see, it was a childish attempt.”

“She deserves it for spoiling my fun!” Lydia said hotly, tossing her head. “How dare she follow me about! Lizzy is not my governess!”

The matrons stood there, squabbling with Lydia, as Elizabeth, Charlotte, Edwina, and the gentlemen made themselves scarce.

A moment later, Mr Collins appeared at her elbow. “Cousin, is that Mr Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire?”

“I believe so, Cousin.” Elizabeth replied.

“I must make myself known to him, instantly! He is the nephew of my esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine!” Mr Collins insisted. “Her ladyship would expect me to pay my respects!”

“Mr Collins, you cannot! Considering that Mr Darcy is the man of higher rank, he must request that you be made known

to him! The man will consider it to be impudent!” Elizabeth insisted.

Her cousin smiled patronisingly. “Cousin, you have been a wonder of good advice since I came to Longbourn, but I flatter myself that I *have* been out in the world, and know what society expects of me. Being a man of the cloth, I have the liberty of approaching those above me, and it is expected of me to carry tidings of relations to one another.”

“Cousin, I beg you, at least ask my father to obtain an introduction,” Elizabeth begged.

“Do not trouble yourself, Cousin Elizabeth. I assure you, Mr Darcy will welcome news of his aunt.” Collins bowed and made his way across the ballroom. Elizabeth watched in horror as he spoke thrice, loudly, to gain Mr Darcy’s attention. As soon as Mr Darcy turned, the man began making his excited explanations for why he had approached him. Mr Darcy looked at the parson as if he were a bug, and cut the man before he finished speaking. Insufferable man! Of course it was impertinent for Mr Collins to approach him without invitation, but could not Mr Darcy be a bit more magnanimous toward someone so obviously and innocently lacking in sensibility? Elizabeth had heard enough of Lady Catherine to know that Mr Darcy must be well acquainted with the behaviour of his aunt and thus ought to be more condescending to an obviously nervous man, dependent on the good will of his relation.

Elizabeth watched as Mr Darcy stalked away from her cousin, who stood in shock with his hand still outstretched, then hid his mortification and approached Kitty, whom he had not yet danced with. Their cousin had promised to stand up with all of them, and while Elizabeth could still not call him graceful or light on his feet, his skill had improved so that he was, at least, not an embarrassment to dance with.

* * *

A SHORT WHILE LATER, Elizabeth and Charlotte had each participated in another dance, and were now conversing quietly in a small alcove. “You were lucky indeed, Eliza, that I

noted something was wrong and followed you. What would you have done if I had not followed, and Captain Carter was indeed alone?"

"I would not have considered myself compromised, I assure you that, Charlotte." Elizabeth said. "Why should I marry to save Lydia when she is the one who attempts to put me in such a position?"

"You have three other sisters, Eliza," pointed out Charlotte.

"And when have any of them, save Jane, ever hesitated to mortify me, or trod upon the credit of our family?" Elizabeth said scathingly. "Did you see Kitty, stealing an officer's sword and shrieking abominably? What about Mary, overstaying her welcome at an instrument she had never even been invited to play? I hesitate to sound cruel, but none of my sisters save Jane care for my chances, I would not give up my chance to marry for love for such an ill return."

"What about Jane?" Charlotte asked. "I suppose you think Mr Bingley is above abandoning her."

"I think he likes her very much, Charlotte. Do not you agree?"

"But does she *like him*, Eliza? Jane is all aloofness," said Charlotte.

"If he cannot perceive her interest, then he is a simpleton who does not deserve her," said Elizabeth decidedly.

"New love makes simpletons of all of us," Charlotte insisted. "She should express more regard than she feels, if she wants him. She may fall in love all she chuses after the wedding."

"And if she does not?" Elizabeth said. "Then her dreams are over, and her life is a prison. You know that Jane and I have sworn never to fall into such a nightmare. We will take our time in courting, and be certain of our matches. There is all the time in the world for falling in love as we chuse *before* the wedding, in my opinion. Neither of us will accept a man

for anything other than the deepest love, which is why *I* will end up an old maid.”

“I hope not, Eliza,” her friend said softly, as she left her to her thoughts. “It is not as romantic as you believe, being an old maid. And I do not believe you. You would do whatever you must to save your sisters, and you know it.” Elizabeth said nothing as her friend left her.

* * *

DARCY LEANED his head back against the other side of the wall where they were speaking. It was wrong of him to eavesdrop, he knew. But once he heard Elizabeth’s voice, he had been rooted to the floor. What were the chances that the handsomest woman of his acquaintance, the cleverest, most witty, and caring female that he had ever met, was also blessed with a sincerity and authenticity that a man might trust, *and* she was determined to marry only for love?

He would be an idiot not to explore a possible mutual affinity with the lady. If his father knew he sacrificed such an opportunity, he would box his ears. It was inevitable, and he had known for some weeks that this magnetism that drew him to Elizabeth was something significant. He sensed that she was the partner of his soul, the one woman he could trust to always tell him the truth. He would seek her out for a private audience without delay. He had seen her many mornings while out on his rides. Even when she had been out late at a party or entertainment, like him, nothing except the worst weather kept her from her exercise. She walked the same route nearly every day, he would meet her in the early morning tomorrow, and beg her for a courtship.

CHAPTER 11



Early the following morning, Darcy obtained two of Netherfield's excellent scones, and wrapped them in cloth napkins, putting them into his saddle bag along with two apples and a corked bottle of cider. He mounted Alastor, and made his way towards the small mount on the border between Longbourn and Netherfield.

As expected, he saw Elizabeth making her way up the path to Oakham Mount. He dismounted and removed his hat. "Miss Elizabeth. I am exceedingly pleased to meet you here this morning. You are very fine in looks today, if I may be so bold. Your exercise agrees with you."

"Am I?" Elizabeth said in surprise – and did he hear a small touch of irony to her voice?

"I assure you that you are," he said gallantly. "Your fine eyes are brightened by the exertion. May I join you?"

"You may," answered Elizabeth in bewilderment. She had been prepared to meet Mr Darcy with derision, for she had still not forgiven him for his remarks at the assembly, but she had to admit that his words about his reticence the night before had plagued her through the night, and for all his previous unpleasantness, she found him an enigma, and felt unaccountably drawn to know more about him. His address this morning was so pleasant, she decided that she would be churlish indeed to meet him with incivility.

They were both quiet as they ascended the small mount, his awkwardness and uncertainty returning, her mystification

and perplexity making her unsure how to proceed. Soon they reached the top, and looked over the view together.

“I am certain our little mount boasts nothing compared to the views you must enjoy in Derbyshire,” she ventured. “I hear much of that county from my aunt. She hails from a town called Lambton.”

“Why, that is not five miles from Pemberley!” he exclaimed. “What is your aunt’s name?”

“She is Madeleine Gardiner now, Miss Madeleine Nye as was,” Elizabeth informed him.

“Miss Maddie! Why I remember her well, she was the youngest daughter of the rector in Lambton.”

“I believe that her father was also the younger son of a local baron, a Sir Walter Nye,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes, I am aware of the connection! I recall an enterprising tradesman who visited the area on business and courted Miss Maddie. I was only a boy of fifteen, but I attended her wedding with my father. Was that Mrs Bennet’s brother, then?”

“What a small world,” Elizabeth marvelled. “Yes, Mr Gardiner is the youngest of my mother’s siblings. He and his wife are excellent people.”

“I have not had word of – Mrs Gardiner you say? Since her father passed away, but her sister, Mrs Picton, still lives nearby, I believe. Please, give my regards to Mr and Mrs Gardiner,” he insisted.

“I will, and I am certain that they will be touched and honoured to receive them,” Elizabeth promised. “So... I cannot contain my curiosity, Mr Darcy. Why did you say that you were so happy to have encountered me this morning?”

Darcy froze. Then he visibly shook himself, took a deep breath, and said, “Miss Elizabeth, it would be the greatest honour, and give me the greatest pleasure, if you would consent to enter a courtship with me.”

Elizabeth was shocked to her core. Whatever she thought Mr Darcy might say. It had not been *that*. “But... Why on earth should you wish to court *me*?”

“You are the first lady of my acquaintance that I have ever felt safe asking for a courtship. You have an authenticity, a sincerity about you that I am drawn to. It is so different from other ladies of my acquaintance,” Darcy attempted to explain.

“I do not follow your meaning, sir,” Elizabeth said uncertainly.

“Miss Elizabeth, think of Miss Bingley and her behaviour in my presence. Have you ever heard her disagree with me?” Darcy asked.

“I am certain Miss Bingley would sooner cut out her own tongue,” laughed Elizabeth musically.

“That is precisely what I mean! I could declare that my skin was green, and she would agree. She and every lady I have ever met,” explained Darcy. “I apologise for this, but I confess that I overheard your conversation with Miss Lucas last night without intending to, and your words about only marrying for true affection. They affected me profoundly. I believe you may be the first lady I have ever met who I might come to really know. Every other lady of my acquaintance would have me believe we were compatible in every way no matter her true feelings. I have no desire to marry a stranger, and receive an unpleasant shock after my wedding.”

“In addition, Miss Elizabeth, I find you quite the handsomest woman of my acquaintance. I am quite captivated by your fine eyes and your conversation. You are also a well read lady, which I appreciate very much,” he concluded.

Elizabeth huffed and crossed her arms. “Fine eyes, indeed! Mr Darcy, if you value my sincerity, I must demand the same. For did you not, at the assembly, in my own hearing, declare me tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt you?” she demanded insistently. The man went white at her words.

“Miss Elizabeth, I must beg your pardon for those words. That must be the most untrue speech I have ever made in my

life. I am sincerely grieved that you heard it,” Darcy explained again but in more detail about his reserve, discomfort in company, and his speaking without looking at her on the evening in question. “Indeed, you have just proved my point again. Another lady would never have admitted to hearing those words in my presence. She would have still hoped I would marry her for her dowry or connections, and she would allow me to flatter her without ever bringing it up. I cannot face such a marriage. With you, when I say something displeasing, your resolve remains. You do not sacrifice your convictions in order to win my approbation. The sincerity of your character would never allow it.”

“So you wish for an open and honest courtship, to discuss our true preferences and opinions openly, without fear of injuring or displeasing one another, in the hopes that we may together come to a mutual accord?” Elizabeth asked him.

Darcy smiled beautifully. “That is precisely what I wish for, Miss Elizabeth! You have bewitched me, not with mere beauty, which you radiate with abundance, but with your mind and heart. I long to be the man worthy of your regard.”

Elizabeth blinked against the radiance of his smile, which she had never seen shown to such advantage. The man was ridiculously handsome, quite the most striking person she had ever seen. It was lucky he smiled like this so infrequently, or she and every lady for miles might be in some danger. She considered for a moment. It was true that she disliked him thoroughly, but perhaps she *had* misjudged him. There was a great deal to overcome, such as his appalling manners in company, his ability to tolerate her family, and her concern over the matter with Mr Wickham. That gentleman had not impressed her by his behaviour with Lydia the night before, but he had made a serious allegation, and Elizabeth must know the truth of the matter. All of these concerns and more must be satisfied before she could consider allowing her heart to be touched, but she could not be so stupid as to turn her back on such a chance for an honest and forthright courtship with a wealthy man of consequence who, like her, sought a true affinity. She had always hoped to meet a gentleman who

sought such an arrangement, but never thought it might happen. She decided to be forthright from the very beginning.

“Mr Darcy, were you aware that Jane and Charlotte Lucas always say that my tendency to prejudice is my greatest fault? I tend to make very swift judgments of people, and I can be very stubborn about changing those opinions, once they are set.”

Darcy answered that he was not aware of that fact, and Elizabeth continued, “Were you aware also that up until this morning, I had very mixed opinions about you, sir, but that my sentiments mostly centred around dislike?” His face fell as she continued, “You have confounded me at every turn since I have met you, Mr Darcy. I cannot decide if you are an honourable man or a cruel one, whether I admire you, trust you, or despise you. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly. I have fought this since we met, and the claims of a new acquaintance have not endeared me to you further. I cannot understand why it vexes me so dreadfully that your manners are not what they ought to be, and that frustrates me. However, I admit that I have not made enough of an effort to know you properly, sir, and I am troubled that my vanity may have encouraged some of my unfriendly thoughts. I don’t like to think of myself as a vain or prideful woman. Your offer of an honest courtship where we might build a sincere attachment is very attractive to me. I never thought to have such an opportunity with any gentleman. I have reservations, sir. But as you say, this would be a chance to come to know one another properly. I believe I may have been mistaken in my first impression of you, and I would like to accept your offer of a courtship in the spirit in which it was offered, in the hopes that we may find a truly mutual accord. If that does not come to pass, I hope that at the very least, we might become good friends.”

Darcy’s heart lifted as she spoke, elated that she had accepted, but understanding that she had been deceived by Wickham. She was telling him, in her way, that she was concerned about what she had heard, and that he must overcome whatever lies Wickham had told her. Darcy decided to tell her everything. He knew she could be trusted. “Miss

Elizabeth, in each conversation we share, I find new reasons to admire you. However, I can see that before we go much further, I must acquaint you with my dealings with Mr Wickham. I can only imagine what he has told you. Typically his lies are wrapped in a small kernel of truth that gives them a ring of authenticity. Will you sit and share a small repast while I acquaint you with the matter?"

Elizabeth acquiesced, and sat on a bench that her father had built there for her many years ago, when she had begun to visit Oakham Mount each morning. He took a seat next to her after retrieving the scones, apples, and cider from his saddlebag.

When they had both eaten for a moment or two, Darcy began speaking. "My father loved Mr Wickham as a son. His father was a great man, and had served Pemberley faithfully. My father rewarded his steward by standing godfather to his son, and when Mr Wickham's father passed, he was invited to live with us at Pemberley. My father was excessively attached to Mr Wickham, and sponsored him at Eton and later Cambridge.

"George was not the happy boy my father knew; there was something sinister in him, but my father would not hear a word against him. At length I ceased telling my father of Wickham's misdeeds, for I ended up taking the blame for many of them. Wickham used my name when he ran up debts with merchants at Cambridge, and interfered with their daughters. My father insisted that I was the spoiled heir, casting blame on a poor servant's son. Wickham believed he had my father quite set to make him his heir and bypass me entirely, having become his firm favourite. When my father died leaving Wickham the most valuable living in his gift as well as one thousand pounds, the man was outraged, having believed he would be the new master of Pemberley. He vowed against ever taking orders, and demanded the value of the living, which I gave him gladly. I knew Wickham ought not be a clergyman. I was already supporting three of his illegitimate children by the time my father left us, and there were whispers of others that the families of young girls had hushed up on their own. Wickham claimed to wish to study the law, and

though I rather wished, than believed him to be sincere, I agreed.”

Darcy sighed and shook his head before continuing. “Wickham signed a document giving up all future rights to the living, and with a bank draft for four thousand pounds, he left us. I heard nothing from him until two years ago, when the incumbent of the living in question died. Wickham materialised immediately, and demanded the living as his right. Not only had he sold his rights to the living, but in addition, he had never even taken orders. I refused his demands, and he abused me abominably, threatening revenge. He was turned out of Pemberley, and told never to return. How he lived since then, I know not.

“He intruded upon my notice again this summer, when he colluded with my sister’s companion to convince her to agree to an elopement. She was saved, but her heart has been broken. She is but fifteen years old,” Darcy trailed off as he turned his troubled gaze to Elizabeth. “I believe you will be good for Georgiana. She needs sincere friends, badly. The society of authentic ladies she can trust. I look forward to introducing her to your acquaintance.”

Elizabeth was in shock as she heard it all. Poor Miss Darcy! And poor Mr Darcy! To have his own father disbelieve him – how disheartening! “I can see now why sincerity is so essential to you, sir. You have experienced a horrifying lack of it in those you should have trusted. I am ashamed of myself now for even listening to such a man. You were correct when you said he would have told lies in a kernel of truth. He told me that you had vindictively denied him your father’s bequest out of jealousy and spite. Even my father saw through it immediately, and asked me why a man would tell such a story to strangers he had only met moments ago, but I was so caught up in the injustice of his story, I would not listen! How could I have been so blind! Wretched, wretched mistake! So much for my study of characters!”

“Surely you could not have expected such dishonesty,” Darcy reassured her. “He has fooled many into believing his

lies, even shrewd men of business, with education, and great intelligence.”

The two talked for another ten minutes or so before Elizabeth had to take her leave or be missed at breakfast. Her family had slept in – so had she a bit – in fact, after the late night at the ball. However, none of the Bennets were in the habit of sleeping very late, and so Elizabeth expected them to be breaking their fast soon. Darcy promised to visit her father after breaking his fast at Netherfield. They could not attempt to court in secret with family like Mrs Bennet and Elizabeth’s younger sisters about. One of them *would* notice something, say the wrong thing publicly, and Elizabeth’s reputation would be in tatters.

* * *

BY THE TIME Darcy returned to Netherfield, Bingley should already have left for London, but instead, he waited in his study for Darcy to return. Bingley was fuming, pacing about, and plagued by aggravation. Caroline and Louisa had attempted to waylay Darcy for an important discussion with Bingley as he had left for his ride, but sensing that they wished him to interfere in Bingley’s affairs with Miss Bennet, he had avoided them, and quickly taken his leave. After the excesses of the ball the night before, the ladies being awake at such an early hour could not bode well, and Darcy had no desire to be part of their scheming.

“Darcy! I cannot believe I am asking your opinion about this, but what do you think of Miss Bennet?” demanded Bingley.

Before Darcy could even answer, Bingley raved on about his sisters’ insistence that Jane Bennet did not love him, and eventually stopped abruptly, and asked, “And where the devil have you *been* all morning, man?”

“I have been on a ride, where I met Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and asked her for a courtship,” admitted Darcy sheepishly.

Bingley’s face was blank for a moment, and then he began laughing, a full bellied bellowing laugh that went on and on and eventually dissolved into uncontrollable giggles. He hung

on the arm of a chair and eventually collapsed in it, which did not become Bingley at all, as he manfully attempted to compose himself. He nearly accomplished it, but the moment he thought he had mastered his expression, he dissolved into mirth again, to the disdain of his friend. He went on like this for some time, hiccuping, with tears streaming down his face as Darcy regarded him stonily.

“All right then, Darcy, enough with the jokes, where were you really?” As Darcy continued to glare at Bingley, his friend’s expression turned from one of mirth to astonishment. “You did not, Darcy! You did! What did she say! Of course she said no... SHE SAID YES! I cannot take it in. I thought Miss Elizabeth disliked you exceedingly!”

“Yes, I am aware,” came Darcy’s chagrined answer. He gave Bingley a short explanation of his conversation with Elizabeth, and Bingley kept exclaiming over and over, “You and Miss Elizabeth Bennet!” until eventually a screech was heard outside the door of the study. Bingley grinned mischievously, tiptoed to the door, and opened it suddenly, as Caroline tumbled into the room.

“Well Caroline, it looks like you have lost on both counts. Darcy is courting Miss Elizabeth, and I plan to visit Longbourn this very morning, before leaving for London, so that not even one more day shall pass without me telling Jane how I feel, and discovering for myself how she feels in return!”

“But I have already written to tell her of your leaving!” cried Caroline.

“Do not worry, Caroline. I can still make my trip to London after I have asked Jane for a courtship,” smiled Bingley.

“Charles, how *can* you ruin my chances for a good marriage like this?” cried Caroline Bingley.

“If anything, I am helping, dear sister. If all goes according to plan you will be a sister by marriage, after a fashion, to Mr and Mrs Darcy. Such connections can only help you in society. I congratulate you on your good fortune! You should have a

husband in no time, now!” Bingley laughed at his sister, and giving another strangled shriek, Miss Bingley rushed from the room, screeching for her sister.

Darcy became serious when Miss Bingley was gone. “In regards to your question about Miss Bennet, Bingley, I can only say that I sense that she and I have being excessively reserved in common. Like I am called to attention by my fortune, so is she by her beauty and her mother, so she never shows her feelings. I believe that I know a mask when I see one. Most ladies would never be able to prevent some evidence of their regard from showing, but she is not one of them. On the chance that you might leave, and she would be under the scrutiny of the neighbourhood, she hides her feelings carefully. I cannot tell you if she loves you; she will never betray her feelings for you until you have declared yourself, giving her the security of knowing that her sentiments are returned before risking the exposure of her own to all and sundry. Miss Bennet is truly all that a lady ought to be in manners, elegance, and kindness. You will have to risk your heart to know hers, but if you feel that the risk is worth it, I believe that you will be rewarded. I will say that I heard her sister in conversation with Miss Lucas last night, saying that if you could not perceive her interest, that you are a simpleton. If anyone were to know the lady’s heart, it would be her dearest sister. And apparently those two ladies have vowed only to marry for true affection. I do not believe that you would need to fear that the lady would allow her mother to force her to accept you.”

CHAPTER 12



*S*trathpeffer, Scotland - 1129 AD

IN A SMALL VILLAGE in the highlands, a group of Gaelic-speaking peasants gathered around a stone. Sticking at least four feet out of the ground, there were ancient carvings in the stone of an eagle, with an arch, or perhaps a horseshoe, above it.

There had been sickness in the village, and each time the small community attempted to return to their usual habits, another case of plague would turn up. Theirs was a small community, but in the last months it had been reduced by more than half.

A man dressed all in black stood behind the stone, speaking ancient words and praying ancient prayers, in a dialect of Gaelic so old, even the oldest amongst them barely understood it.

At length, the man in black led the villagers to the well, and encouraged them to drink from it. Bucket after bucket was drawn, the villagers drank heavily, and at the man's demands, began to bathe themselves, and each other, in the icy water.

Some time later, the villagers realised that the man in black's instructions had ceased, and that he had disappeared, seemingly right before their very eyes. A debate rang out – was he a healer? Could he have been one of the fae? Half of the village was of the belief that he had been an angel, and the

rest were convinced he had been a demon, or some such evil entity.

Those who believed that the man in black was a good man, sent to help them, brought their families to the well, bade them drink and bathe, and found themselves inexplicably cured.

CHAPTER 13



At Longbourn, Elizabeth's absence had been noticed, and was the talk of the entire household, because Mr Collins had been looking for her to ask her advice on a matter pertaining to Mary. Her mother was distressed by her disappearance. A letter had come from Netherfield while she was gone, dashing Jane's hopes for Mr Bingley, and now Mrs Bennet was delirious in attempting to find Elizabeth. Somehow, Mrs Bennet had forgotten in her terror of the hedgerows that Mary was being courted by Mr Collins. The man wished to speak with Elizabeth, and Mary or no Mary, Mrs Bennet was frantically determined that Elizabeth would hear him.

Mr Bennet was more sensible, he knew his daughter's habits, and that Collins was not about to offer for his second daughter, yet he found his wife impossible to calm. For once he had no desire to needle her. As Elizabeth came into the dining room, he thundered at his wife, who was beginning to chastise Elizabeth, "Enough Mrs Bennet! It is obvious that our daughter has been on one of her daily morning rambles, and there is nothing so astonishing or inappropriate about her usual habits! Now! Whatever it is that Mr Collins has to say to Elizabeth can wait until a civilised hour when the entire family has broken their fast! We have all been out very late, some of us imbibed more punch than they should have last night," he said as he eyed Kitty and Lydia sternly, "And I'm certain we could all do with a *peaceful family breakfast!*" Mr Bennet glared at his wife as he snapped open his paper, and the family began to enjoy their meal.

Mr Bennet's speech brought the family twenty minutes reprieve during which Jane was able to pass the letter from Netherfield to Elizabeth for her perusal, before Mrs Bennet began managing everyone's morning. Kitty and Lydia were to walk into Meryton and collect her order from the butcher. Mary was to practise the pianoforte, and Jane was to help Mrs Bennet in the stillroom immediately after breakfast. Elizabeth was to stay in the dining room when everyone left, and hear whatever Mr Collins had to say.

Mrs Bennet was so certain that Mr Collins was going to propose that she began to speak of the engagement as a settled matter. Mr Collins looked panicked, glancing between Elizabeth and Mary, the latter of whom appeared ready to cry, as Mrs Bennet blathered on about wedding clothes and flowers until finally, in a moment of desperation, when Mrs Bennet paused for a breath, Elizabeth cleared her throat and spoke demurely.

"Papa, I beg yours and Mama's pardon exceedingly. I am uncertain what Mr Collins wishes to speak to me about, but I am certain that it is not the conversation my mother imagines. Even if it were, I am not at liberty to hear Mr Collins' addresses."

"Not at liberty? Lizzy, am I to comprehend correctly that you are telling me that you already have an understanding of a romantic nature with another gentleman?" asked her father incredulously. "And if the answer is yes, when can I expect this gentleman to call upon me?"

"Yes, Papa. He is to call upon you today, sir," Elizabeth whispered modestly.

Mrs Bennet began to deride her. "Mr Bennet, the girl is obviously embellishing a falsehood in order to avoid Mr Collins. Who else would have offered for Lizzy?"

"She has yet to do very much embellishing, Mrs Bennet," Mr Bennet observed wryly. "Who indeed is intelligent enough to recognise Lizzy for the prize she is? Perhaps it is Mr Darcy. You boasted to your friends for nearly an hour last night of his affinity for her when he singled her out for a dance. What say

you, Lizzy? Should you like to be the mistress of the deplorable half of Derbyshire?"

Elizabeth flushed pink, and her father choked, spraying his coffee across the breakfast table. "Lizzy, you are joking!" Elizabeth's cheeks flamed further, and she bowed her head in mortification as her sisters all began to exclaim in excitement. This was not precisely how she had planned to tell them, and indeed she had not planned to tell them at all until Mr Darcy came, in case he changed his mind. But she could not stomach the discomfort of her sister or Mr Collins for another moment.

Elizabeth's sisters began immediately begging for fripperies from Lizzy's future allowance, a drawing master, visits to London. Mrs Bennet clapped her hands and cried, "Mr Darcy! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more! 'Tis as good as a lord!"

"Enough!" Elizabeth cried "We are not engaged, 'tis only a courtship! I have accepted, but it is not certain he will ask me for an engagement, nor is it at all certain that I would accept! We have had many misunderstandings already in our acquaintance, there is much to be overcome, but we have discovered we share principles in common, and to that end, have decided to learn more about each other. It does not follow that I will marry him, so you must all stop this immediately or it will never happen!"

"Indeed, it will never happen, for he will never ask, Cousin!" Mr Collins cried in hysteria. "Mr Darcy is destined for that delicate and rare flower of Kent, the Honourable Miss Anne de Bourgh!"

"I refuse to believe Mr Darcy would do such an abominable thing as to ask a lady for a courtship while being engaged to another!" Elizabeth retorted hotly.

"Mr Darcy and Miss de Bourgh have been destined for each other from their cradles – they will unite two of the most splendid fortunes in the kingdom! Bennet, I fear my cousin has been used to sow this man's wild oats. I am sure he has already left for London with Mr Bingley! Cousin Elizabeth I am grateful for all of your kindness to me, but I wish you had

taken greater care. Having intentions in a very different direction, I will feel grieved indeed if I have to marry you to save yours and your sister's reputations."

"MR COLLINS, YOU WILL BE SILENT!" bellowed Mr Darcy's voice thunderously from the doorway.

The entire family turned in their chairs to see Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley standing in the hall behind Mrs Hill, who curtsied primly, and announced, "Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley, ma'am."

Mr Bingley had not been able to wait until after breakfast to speak his heart to Jane, and so the gentlemen had set forth immediately from Netherfield after their conversation.

Mr Darcy spoke, "Mr and Mrs Bennet, please allow me to humbly beg your pardon for my outburst, however, in my shock in entering your breakfast room to hear my private affairs being bandied about, and my honour being besmirched by a man who has yet to be even *properly introduced* to me," he glared at Collins as he referred to his incivility the previous night, "I fear I forgot myself. With your permission, I will address the charge this man has laid against me."

At Mr Bennet's nod, Darcy continued. "My cousin Anne is three years my junior, and very sickly and weak. When we were very young, my aunt commented to my mother how splendid it would be if we made a match and combined our fortunes. My mother agreed that it would be splendid, if we wished for it. My aunt took this to be an ironclad agreement. My father declined to sign a settlement, and so did Anne's father, Sir Lewis de Bourgh. When my mother died, and again when my father died, my aunt renewed her demands for a formal engagement, but my father and I both refused. He made it plain in his will that my aunt has made these demands, and that he has signed no agreements to the fact whatsoever, and that it has never been his wish that I marry my cousin. My uncle, the Earl of Matlock, has letters from both my father and Anne's in which they state their disinclination for the match, and their refusal to make it official.

“I visit my aunt and my cousin Anne along with my other cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam every year at Easter. Sir Lewis left the management of Rosings to my father until Anne marries, and when my father died it fell to me, and so during each visit, I manage what is necessary for their estate. I love and care for Anne deeply as a friend, and as a cousin, much the same as I do Richard, whom I regard as a brother, but I have no desire to marry her. I shall always be there for her, to help her with Rosings or offer any familial protection she may require, but neither of us wishes to marry the other. Anne does not wish to marry at all, for she fears childbirth, and expects that her life will be short due to her failing health; she has no wish to hasten her end. I am not, and shall never be committed to marrying her.”

He looked at Mr Collins. “You sir, are a presumptuous man. You *presumed* an acquaintance with me before one was even obtained. You *presumed* to know and disseminate my private business to the world on the word of a meddling and officious old woman whose aims will never be achieved. I am told you will inherit an estate some day. I can only advise you to find an honourable and respectable gentleman to teach you the manners and rules of society that you must know, or you shall fail miserably if you continue on like this. I only wish to tell you this one time, Mr Collins. if I ever find you again spreading gossip about me, speaking of my affairs, or, for God’s sake, besmirching Miss Elizabeth’s name with scandalous and disgusting falsehoods, I will call you out!” As Mr Collins’ face drained of all its colour, Mr Darcy turned away. “Now, if you please, I have some private business with Mr Bennet. May I have a moment of your time, sir?”

As Mr Bennet acquiesced swiftly and led Darcy from the room, Mr Bingley spoke up and said, “I am off to London shortly, but I find that before I go, I cannot leave without requesting a private audience with Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth slipped the letter from Caroline back into her sister’s hand, as Mrs Bennet herded Mr Bingley and Jane into the drawing room, while Elizabeth sat heavily back in her chair, and stared blankly at the plate she had barely picked at. *What a morning*, she thought to herself. Mr Collins had

stormed up to his rooms in embarrassment and distress, while Kitty, Lydia, and Mary lingered outside the drawing room door in excitement.

After a moment, Mrs Bennet bustled back into the room, sat next to Lizzy, and took her hands. “Now Lizzy, tell me, when he asks, will you say yes? I must know, dear.”

“Mama, I do not know. I can tell you I will only marry for love, even if it means I never marry at all. I have learned a bit about him that makes me think that maybe I *could* love him. But I have to discover it for myself,” Elizabeth replied.

“Silly, silly, girl,” Mrs Bennet tutted and shook her head. “How can I help?”

Elizabeth laughed and threw her arms around her mother’s neck. “I know I try your nerves, but I do love you, Mama. How can you help someone fall in love?”

Mrs Bennet smiled, “And I love you too, dear girl, though I know I haven’t always treated you as I should. Obviously, you must have great worth for a man like Mr Darcy to see it. And you saw what I did not see, and helped your sister Mary when she needed it. Your father was right, and I should have listened. But now listen to me, Lizzy. I know I am not fashionable like the matrons Mr Darcy knows from town. I am aware of my faults, and I don’t wish to ruin this for you. This chance is special. I know that my behaviour is distasteful to Mr Darcy, I have seen it on his face many times. So *how can I help?*”

“Mama, I will never accept anyone who does not respect my family, I do not wish for you to change so that I might catch a man,” said Lizzy, wondering if she had gone mad, because just this very morning that was precisely what she had hoped for. That her mother and family might change so she and Jane could have proper courtships. And now that her mother was offering to do just that, it nearly shattered her heart. She fought the urge to weep like a child in her mother’s arms at such a thought.

“I know that, dear girl, and I love you for it, but I do not wish to embarrass you, so tell me!” insisted her mother.

Elizabeth hesitated. “Well... As I have observed, people of very high rank and indeed all of genteel society, dislike three things in particular.” as Mrs Bennet encouraged her to go on, she continued. “I have noticed that they dislike very loud voices, which is why Jane and I always speak in very modulated tones, as Aunt Gardiner taught us. If you notice, the genteel families of Meryton often act disapproving of Lydia and Kitty when they behave loudly.”

Mrs Bennet insisted she go on, and encouraged, Elizabeth continued, “Society also highly discourages any talk of money or income. Not even references to the cost of one’s possessions. If you discuss such things in public, a gentleman will consider your family to be vulgar, or mercenary... And last, society positively does not approve of speaking aloud of expectations. So if one were to speculate that a man might marry one’s daughter...”

“And throw the others in the paths of rich men, a gentleman finds it distasteful and runs away. I must say, I wish one of you had sat me down and told me this before, Lizzy,” fretted Mrs Bennet.

Elizabeth embraced her mother again, and said, “Mama, we love you, and we all know that you love and want what is best for us. We would never have been so disrespectful as to attempt to correct your manners.”

Mrs Bennet drummed her fingers on the table, contemplating, “Is there anything else? Anything I can do to help make your courtship easier, Lizzy?”

“Lock Lydia and Kitty back in the nursery?” Elizabeth tried feebly, not really expecting her mother to agree. When her mother looked at her ponderously, Elizabeth said softly. “Those two are going to ruin us all, Mama. Last night Lydia attempted to compromise me simply because I would not let her kiss an impoverished officer on the terrace. Thank heavens that there were others besides Captain Carter out there. Jane and I live in fear every day that one day Lydia will be found naked in a soldiers tent. Do you know she and Kitty have been seen *inside* the camp on at least two occasions? Papa laughed about it. Said it was time someone taught Lydia how

insignificant she is. She behaves like a prostitute, Mama. Last year, I was in town with Aunt Madeleine, and one night after the opera, there were women on the street, dressed in colourful garments, and flirting with men. They were fallen women, Mama! And Our Lydia acts just like them. And Kitty will follow, as she always does. It frightens me.”

Mrs Bennet was quiet for a moment. “What ought I to do?” she said worriedly.

“I cannot say, Mama. She has gone so bad that I don’t know what she would do if anyone attempted to check her. Lydia might run away and be lost forever, but she is likely to throw herself away on some useless, penniless, soldier, and the poor girl cannot even heat water for tea. And you ought to expect her to try something very soon, for she vows daily that she will be the first of us to wed. She might run away with an officer in an attempt to be married first, now that I am being courted, and who knows what is happening with Jane in the drawing room. Lydia ought to be watched carefully. You should make Papa talk seriously about it. Once he realises you are in earnest, hopefully he will listen. Maybe a governess or perhaps a school. Perhaps Lydia could visit Aunt Madeleine for a time. If Jane and I marry, you know we will help.”

Mrs Bennet promised to speak privately with Mr Bennet about the matter, then the two left the dining room, and joined the other girls outside the door to the drawing room. As the other ladies bent with their ears to the door, Elizabeth noticed Mr Collins returning downstairs and going out the back doors to the gardens. She followed, and called out, “Cousin, are you well? That did not go very well, with Mr Darcy in the breakfast room. I am certain he did not mean to be such a bear.”

“I was a fool! Why did I not listen to you last night?” Mr Collins cried. “You told me not to approach him. I ought to have waited to be asked. I only worried that Lady Catherine might be furious with me if I did not show the proper respect that is due her and her nephew, and pay my respects to her relation with all haste.”

“It sounds to me, Cousin, as it has since you arrived, that Lady Catherine’s expectations often oppose what is expected by polite society. I hate to sound as if I am insulting the woman, but I fear the lady might be over-puffed with her own importance, and possibly even an embarrassment to her own family in company. I am told that elderly noblewomen often are, with their demanding and imperious ways.”

“You cannot think so!” cried Mr Collins.

“It is presumptuous of me to say it, but from what you and Mr Darcy have let slip, I would shudder to have her behaviour observed in company if she were *my* aunt.” Elizabeth shook her head. “If I were you, when I think of what Lady Catherine would expect, go and ask one of us – or your wife when you have one – what is proper.”

“Is it proper for a man to ask his wife’s advice for every little thing, Cousin?” worried Collins. “I do not wish to act like a boy, running to his mama all the time.”

“Mr Collins, Mary has been raised as a gentlewoman all her life, with a concentration the last several years on what proper behaviour and attention from a man looks like, and what it does not look like. She is also very pious, and traditional in her beliefs and behaviour. She knows just how to expect a true gentleman, and a respected man of the cloth to behave in all situations,” Elizabeth insisted. “The Lord would expect you to make the most of the resources available to you. If he sent someone to educate you, who are you to judge their sex?”

He looked anxious, wringing his hands as he replied. “Cousin, I find myself most distressed that I have already estranged myself from your suitor,” Mr Collins cried. “You have been kinder to me than anyone ever has been in the whole of my life, except Mary, and perhaps my dear mother. I am grieved to think that I have shown myself to be so terrible in the eyes of your admirer. Mr Darcy is so angry at me. I fear I shall never make it right. And I feel so stupid and loathsome for snivelling about it, but what *will* Lady Catherine say? Even if I am to learn how to conduct myself properly rather than how she always expects, she can still make my life very

difficult. Not only my life, but that of my wife as well. Heaven and earth, why do I ruin everything?"

"Sir, you will apologise to Mr Darcy like a gentleman. Do not grovel, or beg. I shall take the liberty of introducing you *properly* to my new suitor. You will stand straight, and look him in the eye and you will explain that you are learning to be a gentleman already, and beg his pardon for the misunderstanding. If he is the man I hope that he is, then he will be generous and forgive you," Elizabeth assured him.

"And if he does not?" Mr Collins asked nervously.

"Then I shall not marry him," she declared. When her cousin began to object that she should not make such a sacrifice for him, Elizabeth replied, "It is not for you, Cousin. I wish to marry a kind man, who is generous in understanding. I sense that Mr Darcy might be such a man, but if it turns out that I am wrong, my interest in knowing him better will be at an end. Now... What was it you wished to speak to me about before I returned from my walk?"

Collins explained to Elizabeth that he was certain that he wished to ask Miss Mary to marry him, and he wondered whether her father might look kindly on the match. "When I wrote to Lady Catherine that I was courting your sister, she gave me leave to remain for some weeks and allow my curate to take on my duties, but I cannot stay forever. I shall have to return to Hunsford soon, and I should not like to leave matters with Miss Mary unresolved."

"I should think that if my father did not approve, he would have mentioned it by now, for your affinity for one another has been marked since you entered the house," Elizabeth pointed out. "You should ask Mary first, to ensure that she is amenable, and that she is ready for you to approach our father."

Collins thanked Elizabeth profusely for her advice, and the pair returned arm in arm to the house. Mr Darcy had just emerged from her father's study, obviously having received the answer he desired. Mr Bingley and Jane had emerged from the drawing room, and Mrs Bennet was in raptures. Before Mr

Bingley could go to Mr Bennet's study, Elizabeth reached out her hand to Jane, who led Mr Bingley over to them.

"Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, may I beg the privilege of making our cousin properly known to you?" she asked.

The gentlemen both tipped their heads in agreement, Mr Darcy looking at Mr Collins rather warily. "Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, may I present my cousin, Mr William Collins of Hunsford Parsonage in Kent. Mr Collins, may I introduce Mr Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire, and Mr Bingley of Netherfield, whom you met briefly last night in the receiving line. Mr Collins has been courting my sister Mary, and is next in line to inherit this estate," Elizabeth finished.

Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley both tendered polite greetings, then Mr Collins spoke, his spine ramrod straight. His demeanour was quite obviously nervous, but he took his cousin's advice, and met Mr Darcy's eye steadily. "I owe you both an apology, sirs. Mr Darcy, I must admit that my father was reclusive, and though we *ought* to have been minor gentry, his refusal to allow us into the society of our neighbourhood resulted in my difficulty in company. My good cousins have been generous beyond measure helping me learn what I must know, and I am attending their advice as diligently as my abilities will allow, but I fear that upon hearing Cousin Elizabeth's news this morning, I became terrified by the thought of the reaction of my patroness. I panicked and spoke out of turn, and you were right to be outraged, Mr Darcy. Mr Bingley, I am certain that you must have been rightfully shocked by my speech. I humbly seek both of your pardons. I apologise most sincerely, sirs."

Elizabeth watched Darcy closely. Would he snub her cousin? The courtship would be over before it began, no matter how silly the man was. Mr Collins had good intentions, and he was trying. Any gentleman that wished for Elizabeth's approval must show a decided abundance of generosity of spirit.

Darcy did not hesitate, not even long enough to meet Elizabeth's eye first. This man might be ridiculous, he may even have insulted Darcy greatly, but he was Elizabeth's

relation, and she obviously valued him. Darcy also respected any man who could openly admit when he was wrong, and those who sought to help and better themselves. He immediately stuck out his hand, and Collins shook it in shock and wonder. "I thank you for your apology, Mr Collins. I hope that your efforts continue, and that you find much gratification in your self improvement," Darcy said.

Elizabeth smiled and let out a breath she did not know she was holding. Perhaps Mr Darcy was a kindred spirit in disguise after all.

CHAPTER 14



Mr Bingley had asked Jane for a courtship and had been accepted. Mrs Bennet, beside herself with joy, refused to accept that her daughters had accepted *courtships* and not *engagements*. They were as good as married in her eyes. Mr Bingley could not bear to tear himself away from Jane, and decided to postpone his journey another day. Both gentlemen agreed to stay for the rest of the day, and for dinner. Messages were sent to Netherfield informing Bingley's sisters of their plans, and inviting them to the celebratory dinner Mrs Bennet was, even as they wrote their missives, planning in the kitchen with the cook. A message returned from Hurst that the ladies had both taken to their beds, and would not attend.

Darcy told Bingley that he would accompany him to London the following day, and bring Georgiana back with him, so that his sister might get to know Elizabeth as they courted. Darcy also planned to bring Richard, and the vowels that he held of Wickham's. After this last defamation of his character, Darcy was determined to do the right thing now, and have the man locked up where he could hurt no one. Elizabeth had shared with him an account of Wickham's lies, and also his attempt to seduce young Lydia, and Darcy was provoked beyond all measure. How dare the man continue his behaviour, and worse, on girls who had nothing of value to offer him but themselves, and could not even provide him with the financial security he sought so desperately? The man was not even seducing for the sake of his financial security. He was doing it for no other reason than to satisfy his own carnal desires. It

had torn Darcy's heart when Elizabeth spoke with anxiety about the safety of her sister and the other young girls in the neighbourhood. Darcy decided that it was time he and Richard finally ended Wickham's reign of terror.

Mr Collins, wishing for less attention than the other men had received when he asked *his* question, managed to secure a private moment in the garden with Mary that afternoon, when he proposed marriage, and was accepted with great joy. He then quietly sought Mr Bennet's approval, which was given, and the announcement was made to the family at dinner, which increased the joy of all the family tenfold.

"I knew how it would be!" cried Fanny Bennet, as Mary blushed, and Collins accepted the congratulations of the men and his future sisters. The two would not marry immediately, but enjoy a long engagement. Mary expressed a concern that she had not yet learnt all that she must in the kitchens and with the housework that she needed to be a proper wife to a parson, and asked if they might marry at the end of the summer, giving her ten months to prepare. Mr Bennet had concurred wholeheartedly, and informed Collins that it was good for him as well, to continue to work on his self improvements, and prepare his home for his bride before he wed.

Mr Bennet had an idea, and he told no one of its conception, only sent an express to Sir Henry Maulver, the local baronet, who lived in London and owned Netherfield, then informed Darcy that he had business to attend to in London, and begged a ride in his carriage to his brother Gardiner's house. Darcy invited Bennet to stay at Darcy House, but he declined.

"I shall not intrude on you young bucks," Bennet chuckled. "You have better things to do in town than spending time with an old recluse like me."

"I am rather a recluse myself, so we *young bucks* are probably more boring than you imagine." Darcy smiled. "The invitation stands, should you change your mind."

"I shall certainly visit this great library I hear so much about from the Bingleys," said Bennet in earnest.

“The *great* library is at Pemberley, and well worth the trip if I may say so myself, though the library at Darcy House is still well worth a visit. My butler will be ready for your arrival, and whether or not I am home, you are welcome to enjoy it as long as you like, sir,” the younger man said. Darcy would move a bed for Mr Bennet into his library if the man allowed him to marry his second daughter.

* * *

EARLY THE FOLLOWING MORNING, when the two men were riding to Longbourn to break their fasts with the family and collect Bennet, Bingley asked, “Darcy, do you still keep that gelding in your London stable? The one you rode when Alastor was laid up? What did you call him?”

“Bartholomew,” Darcy answered as they slowed their horses to a walk. “He is still kept in London, though I believe I will send him to Pemberley to work on the farms and serve as an extra riding horse soon. Why do you ask?”

“Did you know that Mr Collins cannot ride?” said Bingley.

“I did not, though I suppose I had not considered it.”

“Would you mind bringing the animal back with us? I have offered to teach Mr Collins to ride. He is not a small man, and so he will need a large horse, but I fear starting on a stallion or a mount with too much spirit might be too much for him. Your Bartholomew has such an easy temper.”

“I do not mind at all,” Darcy replied easily. “Do you think it is wise, and does the man have the composure for it?”

“Well he *is* a man, and I suppose he could acquire a little trap if it does not suit him, but if he is to be the master of an estate, he ought to learn, do you not agree?” said Bingley. “I must admit that I find it charming that the Miss Bennets have committed themselves to helping him learn, and Jane says that Mr Bennet does occasionally lend his time as well to the endeavour, but there is only so much one can learn about being a gentleman from women, do you not think? It is good of Mr Bennet to help him when he feels like it, but I think the man would be better advised by the example of gentlemen nearer

his own age. I confess that I feel obligated on more than one count to assist him.”

“It is a worthy endeavour, but why do you feel obligated?” Darcy inquired curiously.

“You have been more than generous with your friendship, Darcy, and where would I be if you had never decided to extend it?” asked Bingley.

“You would be precisely where you are now, presumably, but with rather fewer connections in town, I suppose,” answered his friend. “You had perfect manners and were already profoundly likeable when we met. Perhaps I have exposed you to the ton, but the rest of your success in society is on your own merits.”

“But what sort of gentleman would I be if I observed another man struggling, and did not help him when I could have?” said Bingley. “Especially after the generous example you have set for me, and the efforts that Jane and her sisters are expending? Surely, you must wish to be of every assistance to the ladies.”

“I shall not attempt to deter you, and indeed, I shall help wherever I am able, though I believe you credit me with more goodness than I deserve,” Darcy replied. “Of course you may use the horse for as long as it suits you.”

When they arrived at Darcy house, the men separated, Bingley to go and wash, and Darcy to send a note to his cousin, then do the same. By the time he descended the stairs after bathing, then taking a tray in his sitting room, Bingley had left to attend to his business, and Darcy’s cousin, the Honourable Colonel Richard Augustus Fitzwilliam, was waiting for him in his study.

* * *

“DARCY!” Richard boomed, standing as he entered the room. “I thought you were settled in the country for some weeks! Did the beauties of Hertfordshire disappoint?”

“Quite the reverse, cousin, but more about that later,” Darcy began.

“Oh ho! With a remark like that, you believe you can just change the subject? *Is there* a particular beauty in Hertfordshire?”

“There is, but first, a more important subject.”

“What could be more important than the fall of the great Fitz to a country beauty?”

“Wickham.” No other word was necessary to silence Richard’s teasing.

“When you promised me that you would inform me when you located him again, I half expected you to conveniently forget,” Richard grumbled.

“And so I might have done, but he is slandering me again, and not even to any purpose. He is not even attempting to improve his lot, just chasing skirts. Poor ones, who have nothing to offer him but their own ruin. I cannot countenance allowing it to continue,” explained Darcy. The two men discussed Wickham’s appearance in the village, his falsehoods to the locals, and his pursuit of Lydia Bennet, and two others like her, Darcy had learnt before he left Meryton. This included the youngest daughter of Sir William Lucas, and the daughter of the haberdasher. None of the accounts suggested that he had ruined the girls entirely, but it was obvious that he was spinning his web, and would have them all where he wanted them quite soon.

“And what about this beauty you spoke of?” Richard inquired. “You may as well just tell me, I’ll have it out of you or Bingley soon enough.”

Darcy told Richard everything, even an account of his insult to Elizabeth. He was in the habit of unburdening himself completely to his cousin, whom he regarded as closer than any brother. “It is my wish to bring Georgiana to Meryton, though perhaps I should return for her after Wickham has been dealt with.”

“It is long past time you began treating that girl like the woman she is growing to be, Darcy. Much of her experience was a result of your belief that she was too delicate to know of

Wickham's crimes. Not that I had considered telling her about it either, but I do hope we have both learned our lesson. Georgie is still reserved in most company, but she has learned a great deal from her recent months spent with my mother and Priscilla. It would do the girl good to see the dragon bearded in his den, and done with. Bring her with you from the off, I say."

"Elizabeth would give her all of the feminine support she might need. Not that your mother and Priscilla are in any way lacking, but Elizabeth has a streak of fire in her. Her courage rises with every attempt to intimidate her," mused Darcy.

"She sounds like the perfect example for Georgie," replied Richard agreeably. "And she will need that spit and fire against Lady Catherine and the harpies of the ton. What else do you like about her?"

"She is somewhat like Bingley in temperament, but rather more sensible. Not that Bingley is *insensible*, but he sees the best in others, until it blinds him to their faults. Miss Elizabeth is easy in society, but her gregariousness is tempered with her sharp wit. She is well read, and clever. I think I should never bore of her company and conversation. She will be a jewel among the ton, I am certain of it. Most importantly, she is entirely artless and authentic. There is a sincerity in her that I admire, for I have never seen its equal in any woman in society. Where another woman would ignore my faults, Elizabeth holds me to a higher standard. I already trust her implicitly, and she makes me wish to be a better man," Darcy confided.

"I simply cannot wait to meet this paragon," Richard said excitedly. "Darcy is finally to be leg shackled. If you do it before your thirtieth birthday, I shall make a fortune at the club. My bet has been down in the books for three years against at least twenty gentlemen who believe you will not marry until you are at least forty."

Darcy wrote a note to his solicitor, informing him that he would collect Wickham's notes later that day, and set out for his Aunt Matlock's house with his cousin.

* * *

“BROTHER!” cried Georgiana as she leapt from the pianoforte as he entered the room with Richard. “Why did you not tell us you were coming?”

“I have a surprise for you, Georgie. I have met the woman I hope to marry,” Darcy told his sister, after greeting his Aunt Eleanor, and Cousin Priscilla. He took a seat near her, and continued. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire is the exceedingly kind and beautiful second daughter of a country gentleman, and she has agreed to enter a courtship with me.”

His aunt and cousin each burst into happy and excited exclamations, giving him their heartfelt congratulations and well wishes. Georgiana blushed and said, “Will she like me, William?”

“She certainly will, sister,” he promised. “You are dearer to me than any person alive, Georgie, the only link I have left to our mother and father. I should never select a lady who would do aught but adore you. Miss Elizabeth has four sisters, and I know she is greatly looking forward to meeting you.”

“When will we meet her, William? Will she visit London?” begged Georgiana as their Uncle Reggie entered the music room.

“Her father has travelled with me to London, where he is staying with his relations on Gracechurch Street while he attends some business. I was hoping you would accompany me back to Meryton in three days’ time.”

His aunt and cousin began vocally expressing their great desire to accompany them into Hertfordshire, insisting that he would need all of the feminine support and advice that he could muster, and refusing to be left behind. Darcy had no desire to have his courtship become a family spectacle, but he knew that the ladies would never let the matter rest.

“You do understand that you will be the guests of Miss Bingley,” he informed them. “If you can tolerate that, I shall solicit an invitation from Bingley for you.” They were not to be swayed, though they had previously refused all attempts by the woman to gain an introduction in the past.

“If her brother is to be your relation, then we shall have no choice but to take the woman in hand,” sighed Aunt Eleanor. “We might as well begin directly.”

“Oh, Mother! Must we?” whined Priscilla, and with good reason. Miss Bingley in the presence of those she felt superior to was bad enough. Miss Bingley in the presence of those whose ranks she aspired to was nearly overpowering.

“I cannot make you like her, but if she is to be connected with us, then she needs to learn how not to embarrass us,” her mother insisted. Lady Matlock immediately sent an invitation to dinner around to the Gardiners and Mr Bennet for the following evening, which was accepted in short order; and Sir Henry Maulver, was included at their request. Darcy and the Fitzwilliams knew Sir Henry well enough from town, though Darcy did not notice that the man owned the house that Bingley leased until Mr Bennet pointed it out. Darcy knew that Bennet’s business in town was to meet with the man, but nothing more.

Bingley was to attend dinner at Matlock House as well, and was enthusiastic in his invitation for as many relations and friends as Darcy wished to come to Netherfield and stay. “I could hardly complain, I cannot count how many times my sisters have insisted upon accompanying me even when they were *not* invited,” Bingley laughed.

The Gardiners arrived, accompanied by Mr Bennet and Sir Henry Maulver, who they learned was godfather to both Mary and Elizabeth. Mr Bennet and Sir Henry, they quickly learned, were hatching a scheme as an engagement present for Mary and Mr Collins, but the plan was a complete secret until they arrived back in Meryton.

“Bingley!” cried Sir Henry. “Might I beg a bed for a night or two in my house until this grand engagement dinner Bennet has instructed Fanny to plan?”

“Of course, Sir Henry!” I shall send a messenger ahead of us, instructing my sister to prepare the master’s chamber. I can stay in another room, my sister is preparing the entire house for a large party.”

“I will not hear of it! *You* are the master of Netherfield until you give up your lease! The Mayfair room in the guest wing will suit me fine, boy,” the man insisted. “I am certain your sister will wish to house Lord and Lady Matlock in the Cavendish suite, and quite right, too.”

Sir Henry Maulver was in his late forties – three or four years younger than Mr Bennet’s two and fifty – and had been widowed ten years ago with no children. His wife, Lady Alice Maulver, had doted upon Elizabeth and Mary. Jane was also liked very well by both of the Maulvers, but being Fanny’s favourite, Lady Maulver found less opportunity to dote upon the girl, for Mrs Bennet had kept Jane very close in her youth. When Lady Maulver died in childbed in her third attempt to deliver an heir, Sir Henry gave up the house where they had been so happy, and moved permanently to London. His heir was his nephew, the son of his late younger brother. The young man had been rather wild at university, and had been sent to the militia to steady him until it was time for him to inherit. The neighbourhood did their best not to hold Sir Henry’s subsequent neglect of his tenants against him. His wife had been very attentive to her duties, and beloved by their tenants, and he could not bear the remembrance.

The Bennets had not seen Mr Philip Maulver since he was a boy – he was now a young man of about five and twenty. Mrs Bennet had railed against the fates – and Sir Henry’s obstinate nature – for preventing him from reopening Netherfield and bringing the young man into society with her daughters for years. Having a daughter installed at Netherfield had long been a dream of Fanny Bennet’s.

The dinner was exceedingly enjoyable, Lord and Lady Matlock liked Mr Bennet well enough, and Lord Matlock was already acquainted with Mr Gardiner on business matters. Darcy regretted that Elizabeth should not be present when his family came to know hers, though she had suggested that if his family met her father and uncle, and approved of her by association, that her nerves would be more at ease when she met them herself. Darcy had assured her of his aunt and uncle’s friendly and gregarious nature, but Elizabeth still had difficulty believing that she might be accepted by an earl and

his countess, particularly when that earl was also the foreign secretary. She was surprised that Lord Matlock did not wish for his relations to make politically advantageous marriages, but Darcy informed her that the earl believed that political matches invariably fell prone to scandal when the participants were unhappy, and so were not worth the trouble, particularly when so many politicians were so corrupt they could not be expected to keep their promises.

CHAPTER 15



Two days later, the large caravan set out from London. Darcy's carriage was followed by Lord Matlock's and Sir Henry's. During the carriage ride, when she was alone with Darcy and Richard, Georgiana learned that Wickham was in Meryton, and that he was to be punished for his deeds, and removed from good society.

"Must Miss Elizabeth know? What will she think of me?" Georgiana panicked.

"Sister, Wickham told her many falsehoods about both of us, *nothing ruinous*," Darcy assured her, "but nothing pleasant either. It was obvious that he was attempting to use her, seduce her young sister, and at least two other girls, and cheat the merchants of Meryton out of a great sum of money. I found it necessary to confide the matter to her, considering that she and her sister were at such a risk from him. I assure you, I never would have done so if I was not entirely sure of Miss Elizabeth, and I am not speaking as a lovesick boy. You will understand when you meet her. She is entirely to be trusted, and a truly supportive and caring friend. She will lend you courage, I am certain of it."

Georgiana was unsure of many things, but she trusted her brother, and hoped for the very best. If William thought the young lady was splendid, then she must be.

* * *

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, when the caravan had deposited Mr Bennet at Longbourn, they continued to Netherfield, and

concluded their journey. Miss Bingley, exalted at hosting the foreign secretary and his wife, was determined to use this opportunity to show Mr Darcy's titled family why *she* and not Eliza Bennet, was the perfect wife for their relation. Caroline felt certain that once she had obtained the friendship of Lady Matlock – which she was confident she would do in short order – that the lady would know how to detach her nephew from that harlot's claws. If not, Caroline had invited another who would certainly shake the scheming trollop from Mr Darcy.

Lady Matlock and Lady Priscilla were both pleasant as Miss Bingley, her sister, and her sister's husband were presented to them, and Miss Bingley showed them both to their rooms personally. Everyone was installed in their apartments and situated, and by mutual agreement, met in the drawing room before dinner.

They learned that evening that Miss Bingley would not give up Mr Darcy without a fight. By the time they arrived downstairs, she had already accosted him in the hallway upstairs, and Richard had vowed not to leave him alone in the house. The moment the men arrived in the drawing room, she attached herself to Darcy's arm, and spent the night batting her lashes and cooing at him. Because everyone at the table was a higher rank than Caroline, the lady actually exerted herself to be friendly, which all of them appreciated, though her attentions were cloying.

The next day Miss Bingley showed her determination again not to give up on Mr Darcy. For the first time since arriving in Meryton, she insisted upon being included when the party called upon Longbourn, and it quickly became obvious that it was not due to her ladyship's presence, but rather a determination not to allow Eliza Bennet a single moment alone with Mr Darcy. "I do not know what you mean, Charles, *of course* I wish to call upon dear Jane. I have been so kept up with preparing for your surprise house party, we have not seen a soul since you left for town!"

Mr Bennet very much enjoyed watching his wife's panic upon meeting the foreign secretary and his countess in her

drawing room. Rarely was Frances Bennet rendered speechless, but on this occasion, she was entirely bereft of conversation, watching her daughter Elizabeth and her family being acknowledged so kindly by Mr Darcy's noble relations. Lady Matlock quickly put Mrs Bennet at ease, though the sensation still did not render that lady particularly loquacious. Mr Bennet invited Lord Matlock and Sir Maulver to join him in his study, while Mr Bingley acquainted Lady Priscilla better with Jane, Mary, and Mr Collins. Richard undertook to distract the younger ladies with stories from the front, and Georgiana attempted to become familiar with Elizabeth, however, Miss Bingley sought to prevent such endeavours. The lady barely had time to make a pest of herself, however, when there was a great deal of shouting from the hall.

“Out of my way! Out, I say! Where is my nephew? Where is my brother! I demand to speak with Darcy! Where is my brother, Lord Matlock? I was told at Netherfield that they are here, and I will see them at once!” shouted a woman's voice from the hall. Darcy and Richard's brows raised in astonishment. Lady Priscilla and Lady Matlock both covered their eyes in embarrassment, and Georgiana and Mr Collins both went white with terror as the ruckus drew closer, and the drawing room door burst open.

“Darcy! Where is she? Where is this scheming jezebel who dares to aspire to my sister's place? To my daughter Anne's place!” shrieked the madwoman who had pushed Mrs Hill aside and forced her way into the room. She pointed her cane at Jane. “Is it you?”

“Lady Catherine cease this at once! Mr Collins, is this your doing?” Darcy barked.

“Y-y-you cured me of meddling in your af-f-fairs the very day we were introduced, Mr D-darcy, I assure you,” stammered Collins.

“You! You knew about this, Mr Collins! I had to be informed by someone named Miss Bingley, whoever that is!” shouted Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

“Caroline!” gasped Bingley.

“Charles, you said that Mr Darcy’s entire family was coming, I thought that also meant his aunt and cousin from Kent!” Miss Bingley said innocently. “I only sent an express to her to learn if there was anything special we must do to provide for Miss de Bourgh’s comfort!”

Bingley glared at his sister in disbelief as Lady Catherine continued to spew her venom. “I shall write to the Bishop of Kent! You are finished, Collins! Darcy! You will not set Anne aside! You have been engaged since your cradle! You cannot abandon her now!”

“You cannot take his living, Catherine, and you know it. Stop bullying your poor parson, and everyone else, too,” drawled Lord Matlock as the other gentlemen entered the room with him, followed by Richard, who had slipped out to escort his cousin Anne in from the carriage. The young woman was pale and thin, and looked as if a strong wind would carry her away. Elizabeth hurried to the young woman’s side. “I beg your pardon, but you must be Miss de Bourgh. I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Your cousin will introduce us properly sometime, I am certain, but first, you look exceedingly pale. Are you well? Is there aught that my family can provide that would aid your comfort?”

“I thank you for your kindness, Miss Bennet. A chair next to a warm fire and a hot cup of tea shall set me to rights, I am certain, but first, there is a conversation that my cousin and I must share with my mother that can no longer be delayed.” Miss de Bourgh looked at Darcy. “I am sorry I could not stop her, cousin, but let us have this out and be done with it.”

“Very well.” Darcy stood and looked at Bennet. “Mr Bennet, could my uncle and I borrow your breakfast room? I fear your study may be too small.” Mr Bennet consented swiftly, and Lord Matlock ushered his sister and his niece along after Mary, who guided them down the hall.

Darcy turned to Elizabeth and said, “Would you care to accompany us? The matter concerns you directly.”

Elizabeth smiled, “If we are to proceed, it is a good idea to see the worst our families can do, is it not?” Darcy agreed, and

she took his arm as they followed the others to the breakfast room.

“Sit,” ordered Lord Matlock as he ordered the seating to his liking. He sat at the head of the table, his sister and her daughter to his right, and Darcy and Elizabeth to his left.

“What is that person doing here?” Lady Catherine objected as Darcy seated Elizabeth. “I will not discuss my private affairs before a stranger.”

“You were just screaming about your affairs before a room full of strangers, Cathy. These are Darcy’s private concerns as well. It is his choice if he chuses to involve Miss Elizabeth,” Lord Matlock admonished. “Sister, I am appalled that you dragged Anne from Kent in such a state.” He turned to his niece. “Are you well, my dear?”

“I am chilled, but I will be well when we have had this conversation, Uncle. You have my apologies, Miss Bennet. We ought to have done this long ago and saved you this embarrassment,” apologised Anne.

“Do not be troubled, Miss de Bourgh. Mr Darcy has explained the matter to me. I understand entirely,” Elizabeth assured her.

“Well I *do not* understand, Cathy,” snapped Lord Matlock. “Years ago, when George died, was the last time this came up properly, and was legally rejected when you attempted to force the matter. George Darcy was so against your daughter and his son marrying against their inclinations that he actually spoke of it in his last will and testament, as you are well aware. Darcy is not engaged to Anne. However, just under a year ago, you revived the matter, and have attempted to force it every way you know how. Don’t think I do not know of your attempt to bribe people at *The Times*. I pay them more than you do to block such attempts. In addition, they have an agreement not to publish any wedding announcement of Darcy’s unless he comes in and places it in person with the editor himself. So what is this all about? Do you need money? Why the sudden determination to force this again?”

Lady Catherine glared at Elizabeth and opened her mouth, when Lord Matlock interrupted her. “I swear to God, Cathy, if you claim one more time that there is a legitimate engagement between Darcy and Anne, I vow upon everything that I hold holy, I will have you housed in Bedlam. A *public room*.” Elizabeth was rather appalled by the terrifying threat.

“Mother, just *tell them*,” demanded Anne.

Lady Catherine glared at her daughter. “You know *nothing!*” she hissed.

Anne sighed heavily. “Just because I am *told* nothing, does not mean that I *know* nothing,” she said disdainfully. “Mother is ill,” she informed her uncle. “I believe she is very gravely ill. I am told that she was informed that she would expire in a year, perhaps two, some few months ago.”

“Anne!” her mother gasped. “How dare you!”

“Mother, it is very private information, but if it is true, then the family must know of it eventually.” Anne looked at her uncle. “I do not know the nature of her malady, only that it is painful, and that she may only have a few short months left with us.”

Lady Catherine looked sadly at Darcy. “I do not know what to say,” he said to his aunt.

“Say you will *marry Anne!*” His aunt begged. “Darcy please. She will be taken advantage of. Someone will steal her fortune. You can protect her!”

“Mother, I am not going to marry Darcy, under any circumstances, even if he were to agree. Cousin, I forbid you to agree,” Anne said in an aside.

“What is it? Cathy? What is it that ails you?” rasped Lord Matlock in shock.

Lady Catherine was quiet for a moment. “It is a tumour.”

“Cancer!” exclaimed Darcy. “Where is it?”

“I cannot speak of it with you,” Lady Catherine whispered, averting her eyes.

“Like Aunt Abigail, then?” asked Lord Matlock. Lady Catherine closed her eyes and nodded once, as if in great pain at the recollection.

“It seems to me that Miss de Bourgh must have her own opinions on this matter, but no one has asked her to share her feelings regarding *why* she does not wish to marry her cousin,” Elizabeth said gently.

Anne looked at her mother in sympathy. “There would be little point in attempting to protect me by marriage, when such a measure would certainly take my life, Mother. Darcy needs an heir.” When Lady Catherine did not reply, Anne spoke again, “I do not wish to die, Mother. I am unlikely to live to a great age, but I do not wish to die in childbirth. If you wish for Darcy to unite the fortunes, I could easily just give him Rosings Park, and possibly live another decade, if I am fortunate. I believe the estate ought to go to Richard, if anyone cared what I thought about *that* matter; Darcy has enough.”

“You will be kidnapped into marriage in under a fortnight when I am gone!” Lady Catherine insisted. “And who knows what abuses your husband might heap upon you then in order to speed your demise!”

“Are you suggesting that the House of Matlock is incapable of defending our own?” demanded Lord Matlock in outrage.

“I beg everyone’s pardon, but Miss de Bourgh does not need to be married to Mr Darcy in order to receive his protection, or even to live at Pemberley,” Elizabeth pointed out diplomatically. When they turned to her, she said, “I am not engaged to Mr Darcy, as we all well know, so it is not at all *my* place to issue invitations. However, he has confided in me that he cares deeply for Anne as his friend and cousin. I am certain that she would be welcome in any of his homes, to live with his family for as long as she chuses, once he is married.”

“As if you would allow such a thing if his wife was to be you,” Lady Catherine snarled.

“I am the second of five daughters,” Elizabeth replied evenly. “I am accustomed to the company of other women,

and I am certain that I will miss my sisters dearly, should I move to Derbyshire, even with Miss Darcy's company. I am used to the society of my village, and I hear that Pemberley is remote and rather isolated. I will surely have one or another of my sisters with me more often than not, and if my family must be welcome in any home I chuse to live in, so must my husband's family be. I am told that Pemberley is a great house. I am certain we could move any number of relations in and never notice them from one day to the next if we chose not to. That *is* the purpose of such grand houses, is it not?"

"That is a sound plan, Cathy. Miss Elizabeth is right, Anne could not live with Darcy until he weds, but she could stay with me and Eleanor at Matlock or in London until that happy day arrives. She can stay indefinitely, although I believe the company of other young people might be good for her," said Matlock. "It is time to set aside this obsession with Anne's marriage. Trust your family to take care of her. She is one of our own, and none of us would allow a single hair on her head to be harmed. Please, do not waste what little time you have left in this manner, Sister."

Lady Catherine seemed to deflate. "Are you well, Lady Catherine? Is there anything that I may provide for your comfort?" Elizabeth asked kindly.

"I am exceedingly tired," Lady Catherine admitted. "Perhaps Anne and I could have that cup of tea by the fire, and then find ourselves rooms in the area. That Miss Bingley seemed to think I was invited to Netherfield, but I do not wish to presume."

"There is plenty of room at Netherfield; I know Bingley would not begrudge you a bed," said Darcy.

"Come into the drawing room, Lady Catherine. We shall see about that tea." Elizabeth rose, and went around the table to take Lady Catherine's arm as Lord Matlock offered his support to his niece. Elizabeth led the others back to the drawing room, where Lord Matlock introduced his sister to the Bennets.

Lady Catherine addressed Mrs Bennet, “Madam, please forgive my intrusion to your home. I was mistaken on a matter of grave importance, and I was wrong to encroach upon your peace. You have a lovely room here. It must be very pleasant of a spring morning.”

“Yes, it is, Lady Catherine, we are very fond of sitting here on such days,” Mrs Bennet finally found her voice. “We are planning a grand dinner for my daughter Mary’s engagement to your parson. Your family will join us, I do hope you will as well.”

“Mrs Bennet, may I offer Netherfield’s dining room?” offered Bingley. “Your party is getting rather large, and at Netherfield, you may invite the entire neighbourhood if you like. My sister Caroline will be very happy to allow you the management of our cook for the day, and will be glad to assist you with anything else you require. *Right, Caroline?*”

Caroline heard the edge to her brother’s voice, and knew he had been pushed beyond his limits. “Very happy indeed, Mrs Bennet. I look forward to your visit, when you can tell me what you have planned.”

CHAPTER 16



*A*msterdam - 1540

IN A DARKENED LABORATORY, a man dressed all in black added one element to another from a vial, observing the reactions and making notes as he did so. The wall behind him was engraved with thousands of arcane symbols. The wall to his left was the home of hundreds of vials of rare ingredients. He had been in these rooms without leaving for nearly one hundred and thirty years, working, just working, on this most exciting of experiments.

He had ceased to refer to himself by any particular name centuries ago; the man Cartaphilus was as dead as everyone who had known him. He had ceased to require an appellation long ago. His apprentices referred to him as *master*, and he referred to them all as *apprentice*; they came and they worked; they grew old, and they died, then new ones replaced them. They were all the same to him. One day he would move in society again, and he would select a new name when it became necessary.

The room was filled with tables, and around the table were young apprentices, following instructions given by the man in black, and making their own calculations. One apprentice left the room for a few moments, then returned. The man in black glanced up at the young apprentice as he went to a cabinet and retrieved a formula that they had mixed yesterday.

The man in black's eyebrows furrowed. That formula was not ready for transmutation. He rose, intending to speak to the

apprentice, but he was not fast enough, for the man was young, and intent upon his work.

He had only crossed half of the room and cried out, “No, not that one!” before the apprentice applied the formula to the lump of lead in front of him. The chemical reaction was explosive, flooding the room with vibrant colours and strange lights as the apprentices screamed in terror.

He strode into the centre of the room, and raised his hand into the air, controlling the chaos, bringing the devastation occurring in the room slowly down to nothing, as the apprentices whispered excitedly amongst themselves at this demonstration of his mastery of arcane knowledge. When the chaos subsided, he returned to his calculations, as the apprentices repaired the disorder of the failed experiment.

CHAPTER 17



There was a great deal of socialising between Netherfield and Longbourn over the next five days. Georgiana became very close to Elizabeth, and quickly. She also became very friendly with Mary and Kitty, although Lydia had lately become so difficult that she snubbed poor Georgiana quite scandalously. Lydia was in receipt of male attention on an almost daily basis, and she felt that her attention from the local redcoats quite eclipsed the notice that her sisters enjoyed from their “boring” suitors. Those men were unexciting, and Lydia pitied her sisters. She found Colonel Fitzwilliam quite dashing, until the old man turned as boring as the rest of them, and began lecturing her about the reduced circumstances in which army wives must raise their children. Even after visiting one of the officer’s wives and viewing the squalor in which she and her children lived, Lydia had nothing but excuses and explanations. *She* would marry an officer with some prospects. *Her* dashing preferred redcoat would have expectations. *She* was smarter than all of those other women, *they* had chosen wrongly, but it was nothing to do with *her*.

Caroline continued to be a problem for Darcy. She followed him everywhere in the house, outside of the house, she paid the stable hands to send her a note and prepare her horse whenever Darcy’s was called for, and the stable boys were paid to slow the preparations of his mount so she might change into her riding habit and catch him before he escaped. She ordered her maid to wake her at five every day, and met Darcy in the stables before his morning ride, ruining his

chances for early morning walks with Elizabeth. She hung on his arm every time the young people walked out, and she never allowed Elizabeth anywhere near him. Lady Matlock steadily attempted to distract Caroline with her own attention, but as much as Miss Bingley had wished for her ladyship's society, it paled in comparison with keeping Darcy away from Eliza Bennet.

On their second day in the village, Richard and Darcy visited Mr Phillips and asked him to collect Wickham's debts from the merchants in the village, and also sent a message to Colonel Forster, requesting an appointment for the following afternoon. Upon leaving Phillip's office, they spotted Wickham on the pavement some feet away, speaking to a man who was a stranger to them. When Wickham spotted them, he turned white. Richard smiled wolfishly at his prey, and Darcy doffed his hat mockingly. Mrs Phillips was close by the men at her window, as always, so Darcy turned away from the scene and addressed her.

"Mrs Phillips, do you know who that man is speaking to Lieutenant Wickham?" Darcy asked pleasantly.

"I hear tell his name is Huggins, sir. He is a tradesman who is rumoured to have some business in the area, though Mr Phillips has noted that he never seems to *conduct* any business that anyone knows of. He stays at the inn for a few days at a time here and there. My maid Molly insists that she heard Lieutenant Wickham speaking to the man in another language in an alley last week, but the innkeeper's daughter swears the man is English."

Darcy blessed Mrs Phillips at that moment. As unpleasant as he found gossip, there was something to be said for a connection who spilled everything they knew with just one light inquiry. "Is Wickham known to seek the man out often?" he asked easily.

"Well I've heard nothing of the men drinking or meeting together in the pub, but they've been seen many times speaking in the street," Mrs Phillips observed. "Strange, is it not? How the man returns to Meryton so frequently, but no one knows what his business is." The woman sounded put out,

and Darcy could imagine that she was. Mrs Phillips was in the habit of knowing everything about everyone in Meryton, and a mysterious stranger *would* irk her. They turned back to the street, and unsurprisingly, Wickham and the mysterious stranger had vanished.

“Another language?” Richard said, eyebrows raised.

“The only language Wickham speaks is French. He was no scholar in school, and barely learnt to translate Latin or Greek. It was only because Mrs Wickham was French that he learned the language with any distinction, for she spoke it to him from his birth,” Darcy remarked.

“So Wickham has been seen speaking to a stranger, likely in French. I wonder what all that is about?” Richard wondered aloud.

“Perhaps we will find out tomorrow,” Darcy said hopefully, as the men went on their way.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING MORNING ARRIVED, and Elizabeth found Lydia weeping upon the back step, a valise by her side. “Lydia, what are you doing?” she asked.

“Leave me alone, Lizzy!” Lydia twisted away from her. “This is all *your* fault, yours and Mr Darcy’s! If he hadn’t brought that awful colonel who means to make trouble for Mr Wickham, he wouldn’t have to go away!”

“Lydia, what are you saying?” Elizabeth demanded, but her youngest sister wrenched away from her and escaped into the house. They nearly knocked over John, the family’s manservant, as Elizabeth rushed in behind her and forced her sister into their father’s study.

John, who was just going about his morning duties, followed her, and said, “What can I do, Miss Lizzy?”

“John, please stand over Lydia, and ensure she does not leave this room until I return,” Elizabeth instructed. Lydia burst afresh into stormy tears as her elder sister left to awaken their parents. Elizabeth hesitated in front of her mother’s door.

She knew there was every possibility that her father may also lie inside, sleeping; she had learnt that lesson once in her youth. Elizabeth knocked on the door softly.

“A moment later, her mother opened the door in her dressing gown. “Lizzy, is someone ill?”

“No, Mama, but I just encountered Lydia at the back door with a valise,” Elizabeth explained. “I believe she was planning to run away with Mr Wickham. John is watching her in Papa’s study, but the two of you should come downstairs to learn what has happened before the rest of the house wakes.”

Mrs Bennet closed her door, and Elizabeth swiftly returned to the study. John removed to the hall and waited until Elizabeth heard her father outside the door. “Thank you, John, you may go about your morning, I am sorry your work was delayed.”

“Yessir, Mr Bennet, and I won’t say nothin’ about Miss Lydia, she’s jus’ a silly child sir, I’m sure she din’t mean no harm. No point setting the village to gossip,” said John.

“I quite agree, John, and I appreciate that,” answered Mr Bennet as he ushered Mrs Bennet into the study, both in their dressing gowns, and closed the door.

“Lydia Harriet Bennet, what have you done!” cried Mrs Bennet upon seeing her youngest daughter in a chair with her valise at her side.

“Mama!” Lydia began sobbing and threw her arms about her mother’s neck.

“Lizzy, what is going on here?” her father demanded.

“I was leaving to walk to Oakham Mount as I do every morning, Papa, when I found Lydia crying outside. She said something about Mr Wickham leaving her, and it being Mr Darcy’s fault, and Colonel Fitzwilliam’s,” Elizabeth explained.

Thomas Bennet pulled his youngest from his wife by her arm, and sat her in a chair. He pulled a stool close and sat in front of her so that he could look into her eyes. “Speak.”

“Mr Wickham has gone away, and it is all Mr Darcy’s fault!” Lydia said, weeping.

“And what has any of this to do with you?” her father demanded.

“Mr Wickham has promised he would marry me, that we would go to Gretna before any of my sisters wed! But then Mr Darcy brought that horrid Colonel Fitzwilliam, who hates him and wishes to have him framed for a crime he did not commit, because none of them got along as boys! I was meant to go with him! But because Mr Wickham’s friend was afraid that Colonel Fitzwilliam would follow us, he would not allow Wickham to take me with him! Then poor Mr Wickham took my reticule, and pushed me out of the carriage!”

“Poor Mr Wickham! The man abandoned you and robbed you, and you call him poor Mr Wickham?” her father said in disbelief.

“It is Mr Darcy’s fault!” Lydia sobbed. “If he was not so intent on ruining all of Mr Wickham’s chances, he would not be so poor!”

“Who is this friend? One of the other soldiers?” her father demanded.

“He is a man of business who travels here and stays at the inn on occasion. Mr Wickham says they have business together. Wickham calls him Huggins,” Lydia said miserably. “I was to meet Mr Wickham at the end of the lane, but he had that man with him. He must not have known my dear Wickham was coming for me. Wickham helped me into the carriage, but then they began fighting, and the man refused to proceed if I remained. Wickham took my reticule and pushed me out of the carriage. And they just left me there!”

“Did anyone else know of your plans?” asked Mr Bennet forbiddingly.

“I did not even tell Kitty, she would be jealous, and she might have told!” Lydia said.

“And you will still not tell Kitty. You will tell no one of these events, Lydia Bennet,” said her father sternly. “From

henceforth, you are no longer out. From now, until I decide on another alternative, you will accompany your mother everywhere. You will even sleep with her. You will spend *all day* in her presence, *every day*. I will not hear your voice in company. You will be seen and not heard. You will attend no events, and this will be in effect until further notice. At least two years, if not more, I should think.”

“You cannot do that!” Lydia shrieked. Suddenly, her mother slapped her, *hard*.

“How dare you! We are so close to being saved, so close to your sisters having security! So close to me being able to sleep at night without fear that you will have to become a trollop to survive! And you risk everything, your sister’s futures, their reputations, *their happiness*! How *dare* you Lydia Bennet! I will have you know that I have been watching you, young lady, and I do not like what I have observed! I instructed you that a lively, happy girl would catch a husband! I *never* suggested that you kiss strange men on terraces, or attempt to compromise your own sisters in some sort of petty punishment! You are a wicked girl, Lydia Bennet. You *will* accompany me until we find a better alternative, and you *will* remain silent in company, or you will face consequences unlike anything you have ever encountered, young lady!”

CHAPTER 18



Lydia gazed at her mother in shock as she held her palm to her stinging cheek. She had never been struck in her life, apart from one time when she had escaped the nurse and fallen asleep in a closet, even then her adventure had resulted only in a few light swats on her bottom from her father, because the entire family had searched for her in terror for hours before she was found. Her mother had never had a cross word for her in her life, yet suddenly her beloved parent was like a stranger, breathing down fire upon her in a manner Lydia had never thought possible.

“The only time you should expect to leave this house will be for your sister Mary’s engagement dinner,” Mrs Bennet said to her youngest daughter. “I will not miss it to sit home with you, but you will sit between me and one of your sisters, and I swear upon heaven and earth, Lydia Bennet, if you open your mouth to speak even once the whole of the evening, I will have you locked away in a convent! My mother had a cousin like you, who thought she could not be controlled. She is in that convent still, an old woman, locked away with the sisters for her own protection. You will do everything you are told, unless you wish to join our nine and sixty year-old-cousin in her isolation. I will not permit you to ruin yourself, or your sisters.”

Lydia gulped and nodded. Mrs Bennet concluded the conversation by saying, “I believe Lydia could do with a bit of quiet. I shall take my breakfast in my room this morning, Thomas, and Lydia will join me.” Mr Bennet nodded as Mrs Bennet herded Lydia out of the door. Elizabeth assured her

father that she knew nothing else, and would confide in no one but Jane, and they parted in the hall.

* * *

SHORTLY AFTER BREAKFAST, Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived to speak with Mr Bennet, who had sent them a note regarding the matter with Wickham. To their horror, upon exiting Mr Bennet's study, they encountered Miss Bingley in the Bennet's hall, accompanied by her brother and sister, who could not dissuade her from coming, but had hoped to minimise the damage. Darcy and Fitzwilliam had done everything short of beating the woman with a stick to shake off Caroline Bingley.

The other ladies of Netherfield were waiting patiently for the ladies of Longbourn to call on them, as was proper, but Caroline Bingley *knew* that Mr Darcy was going to see Eliza Bennet, and she *would* do whatever she could to prevent anything resembling a courtship from taking place.

“Well! I do not know what sort of business this is meant to be!” Miss Bingley huffed with her hands upon her hips as the men emerged from the study.

“It is none of yours, so mind your own,” Richard growled, having tired of Miss Bingley's antics.

“Indeed, Miss Bingley, who are you to question my activities?” asked Darcy pointedly. “If I have business in Mr Bennet's study, it is no concern of yours.”

“Well, if you have *quite* completed your business, I would be glad for your escort back to Netherfield,” Caroline said, raising her nose in the air and attempting to take Darcy's arm.

“No, I have not *quite* completed my business, and I am not returning to Netherfield before noon.” Darcy evaded her grasp as he and Richard made for the front door.

“Caroline, this really is enough,” said Bingley firmly. “Let us enjoy a cup of tea with Miss Bennet, which is all you claimed to wish for when you came.”

A half hour was spent in mostly enjoyable discussion, and Bingley learned that the ladies *had* intended to call upon Netherfield that day to visit the female guests of the house, but their mother had suddenly recalled a prior engagement that she and her youngest had to visit a cousin near Ashwell, and their carriage would be engaged all day. Bingley announced that upon returning to Netherfield, he would be very happy to send his carriage back for the Bennet ladies, and they would be welcome to spend the entire day, indeed, Miss Darcy and Lady Priscilla were hoping that they would. Jane accepted, knowing that her father was to accompany her mother and youngest sister.

* * *

AFTER SPENDING the early morning alone with Lydia, and seeing that the girl was not convinced that her parents were serious, Mrs Bennet decided to make a journey to Ashwell forthwith. All of Lydia's gowns were swiftly removed from her wardrobe, and several plain gowns more appropriate for a young girl not out were produced like magic. Lydia had thrown a tantrum, but her mother had firmly enforced the edict, and by the time the other Bennet sisters had left for Netherfield, Thomas and Fanny Bennet were in their carriage heading north with their youngest daughter. Lydia refused to speak to either of them the entire trip, and neither of them pushed the issue. It was quite a journey, nearly twenty miles, but Lydia held her tongue, feeling as if she were punishing her mother by refusing conversation.

Eventually, the carriage arrived in front of an actual stone castle. A gothic looking one, that appeared as if it were the home of any number of old women who had been locked away by their families. Mr Bennet assisted the ladies out of the carriage, and pounded on the door. "Mr and Mrs Thomas Bennet to see Miss Harriet Holbrook," he said, handing his card to the sister who opened the door. They were shown into a very sparsely furnished parlour, where they waited nearly half an hour before a much older nun entered the room.

"Fanny!" the elderly nun exclaimed in pleasure. "You are early for your visit this season."

“Hello, Sister Mary Frances, I thought it would be prudent for my daughter Lydia to meet Harriet,” Mrs Bennet explained.

“I see. Good afternoon, Miss Lydia,” the sister said in friendly greeting. “Mr Bennet, it is very good to see you again. Thank you for bringing Fanny and Lydia to us.”

Lydia curtsied awkwardly, wondering why the old woman seemed so forward with her family, and why she looked so familiar. They followed her out of the room and down the hall. They climbed two sets of stairs, and by the time they entered a small bedchamber, it seemed that they had travelled deep into the castle. The little room did not even have a window! Lydia tasted bile in the back of her throat. Her mother would never leave her in this place. Would she?

“Fanny!” an old woman cried as they entered the room. “Have you come to take me to Meryton? Am I to visit my uncle?”

“Hello, dear Harriet. I am here to visit with my daughter today. You are looking very well, cousin.” Fanny said.

“Where is dear Henrietta?” the old woman peered around Lydia’s mother, presumably looking for Aunt Phillips.

“My sister was not able to accompany us today, but we are very happy to see you, cousin,” said Fanny as Miss Holbrook danced around them, and finally laid eyes on Lydia.

“Lydia!” she cried. “It has been ever so long since you came, why have you stayed away?”

Lydia looked at her parents in alarm; how did this lady know her?

“She thinks you are your grandmother, my dear,” Thomas Bennet explained.

Lydia had forgotten for a moment that she was named for her maternal grandmother. She had never seen her likeness, but she and her mother must resemble that lady a great deal. Lydia’s grandmother would have been this lady’s first cousin, so that made Miss Holbrook her first cousin twice removed.

“Come and sit by me, Lydia, and tell me all of your news. Have you attended any assemblies of late?” the woman asked in excitement, as if *she* were a sixteen-year-old girl herself.

Lydia looked at her mother, not knowing how to reply, but after a moment, she just began telling her cousin about the recent ball at Netherfield Park, and about Jane and Elizabeth’s suitors, and the officers whom she had danced with. Miss Holbrook was voracious for news of such doings, and questioned Lydia endlessly about her lace, her ribbons, the jewellery and finery worn by the other ladies, and the number of dances she had enjoyed.

“Have you kissed any young men? You must not, you know! That is how I got into trouble, Lydia, although you *were* the one to warn me. I should have listened to you, cousin. You always were so very clever.” Miss Holbrook looked over at Mr Bennet, somehow finally appreciating his presence, and laughed as she danced over to him. “Hello, good sir! Have you come to take me away from here?”

The old woman giggled and danced away again, and suddenly Lydia could see her own behaviour mirrored in this woman’s actions, a sort of grotesque view into the future, and she suddenly felt faint.

Miss Holbrook was distracted again by the arrival of Sister Mary Frances with a tea tray. The refreshments were modest, as one might expect in a convent, and Lydia was quiet as her parents chatted lightly with the nun, and Miss Holbrook made little remarks here and there about gentlemen coming to take her away, or to meet her outdoors in the moonlight, and how she intended to be the first of her cousins to wed. Though she seemed to understand that Fanny was her first cousin Lydia Holbrook’s daughter, Lydia Bennet’s presence seemed to confuse her entirely, and she somehow did not understand that the fifteen-year-old girl in front of her was not her forty year old cousin’s mother. It was obvious that their visit tired her, and shortly after they finished their tea, they took their leave.

CHAPTER 19



Lydia was silent for a whole hour in the carriage, but when she spoke, it was not to apologise or beg her parents' pardon. Lydia Bennet was *angry*. "Is she mad?" she asked her parents.

"They did not believe she was when she was brought there, but if she was not, she became so after so many decades there," Mr Bennet answered.

"And what, may I ask, did poor Miss Holbrook do to deserve being locked away?" Lydia demanded. "If this is to be the punishment I am to be threatened with, I believe I have the right to know. Was she locked away for life, merely for kissing officers?"

"If only that were all," her mother said sadly. "It happened before I was even born, of course. She was much like you and I, Lydia. Lively and happy. But she was flirtatious. Excessively so. It started with light coquetry, and then led to sneaking away from her sister and kissing officers in secluded locations. I am told there was a regiment nearby. Harriet got into trouble. She was with child at sixteen. She was sent away, ostensibly to help nurse a sick relation in the north. Her baby was adopted by good people. When she returned, she was no different. Her parents could hardly keep her in forever. They needed to get her wed before she got into trouble again. They kept her in for a year when she returned, but before she could even be let out again after her eighteenth birthday, she was with child again. This time there was no regiment. Presumably it was the work of a local man, but it quickly became clear that

there were so many local men involved that marriage to anyone was quite out of the question. She was sent away again, and when she returned, instead of going home, she was sent to the convent. She has been there ever since. I did not learn of her until Jane was three. That was when my mother feared that Harriet would survive her, which she has, by well more than a decade. She began bringing me and Henrietta with her, so that the visits might continue. We go twice each year.”

“Abandoned,” Lydia spat. “And you believe that this is what I am to become?”

“Lydia, I have no idea what to expect from you any more,” her mother sighed.

“But if I do not fall in line, that is what I can expect for my future,” Lydia said angrily.

“Of course we would not leave you there forever, Lydia, but if we must, we will lock you up until all of your sisters are wed. We cannot allow you to ruin their chances. They do not deserve it,” answered her father sternly. “When we arrive home, you will find things very different. As you have been told, you will accompany your mother at all times until we decide whether a governess or a school would be best for you.”

“BUT HOW CAN YOU JUST LEAVE HER THERE?” shrieked Lydia. At her father’s raised brow, she continued angrily. “*How* can you just ride away in your carriage, and leave her there alone? Your own family! Locked up in a dreadful castle, and you only visit twice a year! How can you call yourselves human beings?”

“She is not alone, Lydia,” her father said gently. “Did you not recognise that Sister Mary Frances was also your cousin?”

At Lydia’s gasp her mother nodded. “Frances is Harriet’s elder sister by a year. She was ruined by Harriet’s behaviour. There was a gentleman that she loved, from the north, but his parents made him come away when the second pregnancy became public in the village. He returned some ten years later after they passed, but by then her parents were also dead, and Frances refused to leave Hertfordshire to live in the north.

Harriet's mind had become fragile, and they did not believe she could be safely moved. Frances would not live where she could not visit often, so she sent him away, then she entered the convent as a novice. She has stayed with her sister all this time. Harriet is not alone."

Lydia thought of Kitty as an elderly nun, keeping her company in a convent where she had been sent to save the reputation of her sisters, and felt ill. "Why do not more girls go to places like that?" she asked. "Why do so many ladies end up in the streets as mama fears?"

"Well Lydia, for centuries, there were no nuns or convents in The Church of England," her father answered her. "The restoration of religious orders is a relatively new practice¹, all things considered. Obviously the church cannot afford to support all of the spinsters of our nation. It takes dedication to become a Bride of Christ. It is my understanding that your cousins entered the convent when it was still brand new, and that their dowries eased their way, along with some family connections. Cousin Harriet is not a nun, in any case. She is there as a guest of the convent, they have been entrusted with her dowry in exchange for her care. Sister Mary Frances had to devote her entire life and her dowry to God in order to earn her place."

Lydia was quiet the rest of the journey home. She did not know what to say to her parents, nor what she felt about anything any more. Her mind would not rest when she retired to bed with her mother. Every time she fell asleep, she dreamed that she was in front of a mirror, watching as her face changed, and she was transformed into Cousin Harriet.

* * *

THE REST of the week passed without incident. Lydia spent all of her time with her mother, or occasionally Jane and Lizzy together. It had been made abundantly clear that Lydia was to obey them and Mary as she would her father and mother. She was not permitted to walk out, or even go as far as the garden; her activities were completely confined to the house. She spent a small amount of time with Jane and Kitty in the still room,

and a little more in the kitchen with Lizzy. The rest of the time she spent with her mother, writing invitations to Mary's engagement dinner, visiting tenants, helping her mother sew for the estate's poor basket, and working on her stitching. The ladies from Netherfield called at Longbourn often, and the Longbourn ladies returned those visits with great relish. When these visits were taking place, Lydia joined her father in his study, where she was learning to improve her sums. Her education was sadly lacking, and her father told her that since she had nothing better to do, she might as well rectify it, so that possibly one day, she might be able to pass herself off with a degree of credit.

The visits between Longbourn and Netherfield were greatly anticipated on both sides. Jane and Lizzy had become quite friendly with Anne, Georgiana, and Lady Priscilla, and Mrs Bennet had become as thick as thieves with Lady Matlock and Lady Catherine. As the two noblewomen got to know Mrs Bennet, they began to give her a great deal of friendly advice, and though Lady Catherine's interference was not typically welcomed by its recipients, Mrs Bennet wished desperately for her shortcomings not to stand in the way of her daughter's happiness. She took all of the ladies' well-meant advice in the manner it was intended, and with gratitude. Lady Catherine gave her a great deal of instruction on how to manage what was left of the education of the daughters not being courted, and Lady Matlock spent hours with her looking at fashion plates from London, telling her what the matrons of high society were *really* wearing, and they talked for hours about how much lace and embellishment was elegant, and when too much became tawdry. Mrs Bennet learned to modulate her tones, and though her excitement still often got the better of her often, she managed not to be too crass. The rest of the occupants of Longbourn and Netherfield found her enthusiasm for the activities of the young people and the social events of the village endearing.

The gentlemen spent a great deal of time in one another's company as well, although Lord Matlock spent some hours closeted away with secretaries who travelled from London each day to confer with him. Each time a royal messenger

passed through the little village, escorted by the royal guard, to deliver a message to the foreign secretary, the little village went wild with excitement, and the Bennets were accorded much approval for being the family that he was connected with there.

Darcy and Bingley spent most of their time with the ladies, except for the time that Darcy and Bingley spent teaching Mr Collins how to ride. The man was nervous at first, but Colonel Fitzwilliam took over, and his brusque, militant manner soon had Mr Collins standing at attention. Collins became too busy obeying Richard implicitly to dwell on his nervousness. Richard wanted to leave immediately to follow after Wickham, but unfortunately, he could not. He confided to Darcy that he was obligated to remain at Netherfield until he received orders from the war office for a special assignment, so the search for Wickham was left to Colonel Forster for now.

Upon taking up residence at Netherfield and learning that her parson was affianced, Lady Catherine declared that she was excessively attentive to such matters, and decreed that it was inappropriate for Collins to remain under the same roof with Mary now that they were engaged. Bingley invited him to move to Netherfield, and the society of the other gentlemen there was good for him. The older gentlemen took over in Collins' instruction when the younger were otherwise engaged with their ladies. They assisted him in improving his barely tolerable skill at sums for keeping ledgers, they taught him about agriculture, crop rotation, and how to handle tenant disputes. They took him hunting and fishing, and insisted that a gentleman who expected to inherit an estate must know how to shoot. They spent a great number of hours closeted together; Mr Bennet, Lord Matlock, Sir Henry, and Mr Collins. Two days before the engagement dinner, Mr Bennet invited Lady Catherine to join him, Sir Henry, and Mr Collins for a discussion about business. They were sequestered for nearly two hours, and everyone wondered what it meant, but they were all informed that they would find out what the business was at the dinner.

Darcy could not shake Miss Bingley in order to court Elizabeth properly, and Colonel Fitzwilliam was hard pressed

to distract the woman. Even he, as the second son of an earl, could not lessen her interest. Only Bingley's and Hurst's edict that both Caroline and Mrs Hurst must begin to learn the duties of the mistress of an estate gave Darcy any peace. Two days a week, Caroline and Louisa were obligated to go to Longbourn to learn from Mrs Bennet about her methods, and one afternoon, Lady Matlock and Lady Catherine both ambushed the two younger women, insisted that they change into plain attire – their travelling gowns were all that they owned that was suitable for such an activity – and they were obliged to go out in the pony cart with Jane, escorted by Bingley, to meet their tenants. Charles threatened them both with dire consequences if they were rude or condescending. Louisa followed his edicts, for if he revoked their long term invitation to live with him until Hurst inherited, Mr Hurst would be angry indeed with her. Caroline would not risk being sent to live with her father's Aunt Clara in Scarborough, so though she seethed inside knowing that Darcy was spending time with Eliza Bennet in her absence, she did as she was bid.

¹ The restoration of religious orders in England occurred in the mid to late 19th century, and has been brought forward to the Regency under creative licence.

CHAPTER 20



The night of the dinner arrived, perhaps two weeks after the men returned from London. The ladies had assisted Caroline and Louisa in decorating the house for the upcoming festive season, the men brought in pine boughs, holly, and mistletoe from the woods. To make the decorations for the evening extra special for Mary, her godfather Sir Henry sent to town for a wagon filled with red and white roses from the hothouse suppliers, and they were worked into the greenery for a romantically festive effect.

The entire neighbourhood turned out for the evening. The event was not a ball technically, but two large parlours had been opened off of the music room, and while ladies exhibited on the pianoforte, some of the young people paired up and danced. Lydia was permitted to stand up thrice, once with her father, once with Kitty, and once with Mr Collins. Mr Collins and Mary danced together nearly all night, and no one considered it a scandal. Their joy only increased that of the entire party. The evening was filled with laughter and merriment, and, as usual, the only person who did not enjoy herself was Caroline Bingley.

At dinner, Sir Henry Maulver stood and said, "I have an announcement to make. More than one, actually." The other guests tittered. "First, Mr Babcock, our rector, has made the decision to retire permanently, and will move to Suffolk to be near his relations in January." There were congratulatory murmurs and light clapping about the room, as he continued. "One might think that Mr Stringer, our well-respected curate might take his place, but as it happens, Mr Stringer has

accepted a living near his home village, and will be leaving us to return to his home in Stevenage, where he will be married in February!” More polite exclamations followed, and when they had quieted, Sir Henry continued again. “In anticipation of their departure, I have offered the living in Meryton to one who will be a gentleman amongst us one day, God willing, not *too* soon we all hope, and who has a great desire to learn everything he can about this village, his future estate, and to be close to his family. I congratulate Mr William Collins, who has accepted the position as rector to the Meryton Parish, and will take over from Mr Babcock in January!”

Congratulations broke out across the tables as people congratulated both Mr Collins and Mary on their good fortune. Miss Mary Bennet’s future husband was considered slightly tedious by some of the locals, but it was obvious that he was well-meaning and had a great desire to be liked and learn everything he could in preparation of being a gentleman someday. Miss Mary had, since receiving honest attentions from a kind man, blossomed, and was a great deal less pedantic and a great deal more likeable. The neighbourhood was happy for them both.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, the ladies of Netherfield and Lucas Lodge called upon Longbourn, and they had their usual natter. Caroline and Louisa were obliged to attend by Mr Bingley and Mr Hurst, because the men were determined that the ladies should learn to be polite in company. Lydia was permitted to sit with the younger girls under her mother’s supervision. She, Kitty, Maria, and Georgiana trimmed bonnets at a table by the window while the other ladies first discussed the previous evening with relish. Jane, Lizzy, Priscilla, and Charlotte made up their own little group, and Anne and Mary were discussing something quietly in a corner. When they had exhausted the topic of the dinner, they then discussed their plans for the upcoming festive season.

Lord and Lady Matlock were planning to visit their estate in Derbyshire for the holidays, and then return to London. Darcy and Georgiana would stay at Netherfield for the festive

season and the winter, so that Darcy and Elizabeth might continue to get to know one another. A trip to London after Christmas was discussed by the gentlemen and the ladies, and it was decided that if Aunt Madeleine and Uncle Gardiner were amenable, Jane and Elizabeth might go to London to visit their relations for a month when they returned to town after Twelfth Night. Darcy and Bingley would stay at Darcy House, and those conducting courtships could enjoy the excitement of the city. The theatre and opera would be visited, as well as Vauxhall and the museums. Depending on how prepared Mr Collins felt to take over his new parish, Mary and Mr Collins might accompany them for two weeks, to have a bit of an adventure before he settled down in his new role.

Lady Priscilla voiced a desire to remain at Netherfield when her parents left for Matlock, so she might enjoy the company of Georgiana and her new friends. Darcy and Georgiana must travel north in the spring, to see to the tenants and the spring planting, and Lady Priscilla would go with them and return to Matlock then, for Lord Matlock would briefly return to Derbyshire to see to Matlock's spring planting. Georgiana was to be a guest of Lady Matlock at Brighton in the summer. Elizabeth was invited by Georgiana and Lady Matlock to join them, and Darcy would arrive at the seaside when he was at liberty to do so. Colonel Fitzwilliam had just this morning been summoned for his special assignment. No one knew where he would be going, but he had said he did not believe his mission would take him outside of England on this occasion. He was leaving the following day.

Lady Catherine announced that Mr Bingley had invited her to remain at Netherfield for the duration of Darcy's visit, for she still feared for Anne's safety as her own health weakened from her condition. So far it was progressing very slowly, and though it was painful, Lady Catherine thought she still had some months left, perhaps even more than the doctor had originally thought, for she still had energy for her daily activities. She would journey home to Rosings before her health became so weak that she could no longer do so.

Lady Catherine looked at Caroline Bingley after she had related this to the other ladies, and said, "I will take this matter

with you in hand before I go, Miss Bingley.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Miss Bingley.

“My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such a moment as this, I will not part from it. Here and now, in front of every lady who has been obliged to watch you force your society upon my nephew, a man who has not the slightest interest in you, in a most unseemly manner, I am telling you. Miss Bingley, every lady present, those who know Darcy well, and even those who know him little, will agree that it is obvious that he will never offer for you. It is high time that you give up your unbecoming display.”

Caroline went white as Mrs Bennet, Lady Matlock, and even Mariah Lucas nodded their agreement. Her mouth worked for a moment, and before she was able to move past her shock and up to a scream of outrage, Lady Catherine spoke again. “Miss Bingley, just because my nephew is never going to bed you, does not mean you cannot still benefit from the connection. If the courtships of Darcy and your brother reach their natural conclusion, then you will be sister, after a fashion, to Mr and Mrs Darcy. This can only throw you into the path of other rich men, even titled ones. You are not unattractive, and I am told your dowry is quite tolerable, if not quite the equal of those of my daughter or nieces. It is only your character and behaviour that is lacking. The women in our family have agreed that if you will be connected to us, that it is our responsibility to see your address and comportment set to rights, and that you are one day well-settled, so that you are not an embarrassment to us. You might try looking at the woman Mr Darcy is courting, and attempt to determine what it is that makes her so worthy. The same with the lady your brother courts. If you can possibly learn your place, to speak intelligently, and learn the duties of the mistress of an estate with distinction, there is every chance that you will gain the attention of someone worthy who is connected to us. There are other rich and well connected men than my nephew.”

Miss Bingley was speechless that the older woman had the audacity to speak to her thus, and in front of all of these

country mushrooms no less! Lady Catherine took her muteness for acquiescence, and continued. “You will spend your time with me and my niece Lady Priscilla during the rest of my time here in Meryton. You will learn how to behave amongst those of rank – do not interrupt me girl, I say you do *not* know how to behave among those of rank – and you will also learn how to dress like a woman of rank, and what colours suit you, for it is obvious that you are quite colour blind. You will learn how to properly care for an estate. Mrs Hurst, you are not quite as offensive as your sister, but you may attend us if you wish. I am certain that you could be improved as well. Miss Bingley, If I am not content with your progress before I return to Kent, then you will accompany me to continue your education when I go. I will not leave this earth until you are a credit to us all. I insist upon it!” The lady pounded her cane on the floor as she spoke for emphasis.

Then she turned to Lydia. “I can see that your mother is taking you in hand, girl, and not a moment too soon, I hear. Learn what is expected of you, so that you might join the other young ladies, and relish the delights that those who are rewarded for their good sense enjoy. Otherwise, you might find yourself travelling into Kent with Miss Bingley to be educated by me on my deathbed.”

Caroline and Lydia both looked around the room, horrified at being spoken to thus in company, but it was obvious that none of the other ladies objected to how they were being treated. Lady Matlock looked positively forbidding, as did Lady Priscilla. Mrs Bennet regarded Lydia sternly, and the girl dared not respond, only ducking her head in acknowledgement. The other young ladies, the Bennets, Lucases, and even Georgiana, looked at them with kindness, but made no objections or attempted to defend them in any way. The two young women, feeling outnumbered, were silent.

CHAPTER 21



Longbourn,
April 1812

“OH DEAR,” Elizabeth said at breakfast. “Our summer is ruined!” Her father had just passed her a letter from Lady Priscilla. “Lord Matlock has been thrown from his horse, and broken his leg! The doctor says that it is a terrible break, and that two months may not be sufficient for his healing. The Matlocks will not journey to Brighton this summer.”

“Do not worry, Lizzy.” Her father smiled at her. “I am certain your suitor will journey to spend the summer with you in Meryton.”

“I am certain that he will, but it is still a shame. Poor Lord Matlock,” Elizabeth replied.

“Perhaps being under your mother’s nose this summer will inspire the two of you to finally come to an understanding with your gentleman friends,” Mr Bennet teased. “You and Jane have tried her nerves sorely these months. It is a good thing Mary is engaged, or Mrs Bennet would have expired of anticipation before St Valentine’s Day.”

“There is no excuse to drag out a courtship in such an abominable manner!” cried Mrs Bennet. “Especially you, Jane; Mr Bingley has not been in the north all spring like Mr Darcy has. The two of you ought to have come to an understanding by now!”

“I will be certain before I commit myself, Mama,” said Jane serenely. “Mr Bingley feels the same. He has confessed

to me that he fell in and out of love quickly, and often, in town. He wants to be certain that what we feel for one another is abiding, and I agree.”

“Oh, pish!” Mrs Bennet said.

“I believe it is eminently sensible,” said Kitty. “I should like it very ill if I were to be married, and my husband fell in love with another angel the very next time we went to town.”

“Which is why I consider it fate, that when Mr Bingley travels to Kent to retrieve Miss Bingley in two weeks, he shall detour to London and spend a fortnight there before returning.” Jane replied to her sister. “Miss Bingley is excited to try out her new manners in society, and he is to escort her to some entertainments and visit Mr and Mrs Hurst before returning to Netherfield. Now that Lady Catherine and Anne both vouch for Caroline’s behaviour, Lady Matlock has sent a note to a very select few of her friends, asking that the Bingleys and the Hursts be added to their invitation lists. Her society will still be limited, of course, until either someone else in London takes a shine to her and adds their support, or until Lady Matlock has been to London to judge Caroline’s reception herself, when she will decide whether to introduce her to more of their acquaintances.”

“Have you lost your senses! Jane Bennet, how could you be so foolish! You must travel to visit your aunt while Mr Bingley is in town, you must not let him forget you! What if he meets some nobleman’s daughter from one of these new invitations?”

“If he is to forget me so easily, then the sooner the better, I think,” responded Jane, unruffled. “Of course, if his affections *did* prove to be unreliable, I will not lie and say that I would not be devastated, for I believe we *have* courted long enough for me to admit that my hopes are very high. I am *certain* that I can trust *all* of you not to repeat that.” She eyed her mother with a rather stern expression for Jane. “But still, Mr Bingley has admitted himself to be capricious in the past. It speaks well of him that he wishes to know his heart and mine well before we commit ourselves. I will not go to London. I will

remain here in Meryton, and assist Mary in her efforts on the parsonage.”

“Brava, Jane.” Elizabeth smiled at her sister. Jane had finally learned that the trick to escaping her mother’s endless speculation about her feelings and affairs among the other ladies of society, was to be open with her, and then *demand* her confidence. Mrs Bennet, grateful to have the knowledge that Jane very much *wanted* to be married, and was encouraging a gentleman in her own way, allowed that to be enough, and interfered less in her courtship. Elizabeth had convinced her mother that while Mr Bingley was a prize, that even if Jane did not marry him, it was *impossible* that she would not wed. Elizabeth assured her mother that she had always been correct. Jane *could not* be so beautiful *nor* so good and kind for nothing. It was unthinkable that some man would not see her worthiness. And now that Mary was to wed Mr Collins, they had no fear of the hedgerows. These thoughts calmed Mrs Bennet greatly, and she fussed a great deal less.

“And *I* shall be very grateful for Jane’s help. It was so very kind of my godfather to offer to redecorate the entire parsonage before our wedding,” said Mary. “William and I appreciate it so much, for little had been done to it since before Mr Babcock arrived, and he has been here over forty years.” Mary’s godfather refused to allow her to move into a shabby parsonage. Sir Henry had set up an account for her at Uncle Gardiner’s warehouse, and Mary had been given leave to refurnish the parsonage from Netherfield’s attics. A great deal of time had been spent selecting samples of fabrics with her sisters, and an adventure to search the attics in question had been planned for the following week, with Mr Bingley’s blessing. They would not go to excess, a clergyman’s home should be modest, but the wall coverings, fabrics, and furnishings would be of good quality, and give the impression of gentility. Sir Henry had even insisted that a very small pianoforte from a back parlour of Netherfield be moved to the parsonage for Mary. Her playing still suffered. Even after working diligently with Georgiana for months, her playing had not improved very much, but she still loved to practise every day; it brought her great peace. Thankfully, William had not

much of an ear for tune, and he enjoyed hearing Mary play no matter how she sounded.

“Hullo, cousins!” greeted William Bennet as he entered their breakfast room. Mr Collins had learnt shortly after his betrothal to Mary that in order to take his inheritance upon the death of Mr Bennet, he must return to the Bennet name, which his grandfather had parted from when he married a woman with property. That property had been lost to bad debts, and his father had always been bitter about it. Instead of expecting Mary to change her name to Collins upon her marriage, and then back to Bennet upon the death of her father, he had officially changed his last name to Bennet before taking his place as rector in January.

“Hello Cousin William!” The Bennet ladies chorused as he took a seat next to Mary, a seat which was always kept for him, for he joined the family often. “Hello, my dear, you look radiant this morning,” he said to Mary, as he smiled at the rest of his cousins. “As do you all, ladies.”

“What elegant little compliments you bestow so liberally, Cousin,” Elizabeth teased him. “I am certain you must lie awake all night arranging how to give them as unstudied an air as possible.”

“No such effort is required when my dear family are the ladies in question,” William laughed. “You all make it far too easy for me, the accolades merely slide off my tongue.” William got on exceedingly well with all of his cousins, having come to know them all individually, and appreciate them each for their own merits, but his bond with Elizabeth was special. Cousin Elizabeth had been the first to welcome him to the family; the first person in his entire life to give him sound and altruistic advice. He credited her entirely with his acceptance into the Bennet family, and he would be grateful until he died for her kindness.

“I just heard from Darcy, Elizabeth,” he informed her. “I wrote two weeks ago, asking if he would consider selling Bartholomew. He says he will take it into close consideration, but asks if I might wait until September for his answer. Odd request, but it is not as if I must be in any hurry to purchase a

horse. I merely felt guilty for monopolising his, and offered to buy him because I like the beast so well, and thought to give him an opportunity to ask for the animal back if he did not wish to be rid of him. Instead, he says that it is more convenient to house him at Netherfield presently. Mr Bingley is willing to keep him on in his stables, and Mr Darcy asks if I might do him the favour of delaying the purchase of another horse, so that I might exercise Bartholomew for him until he can give me his answer.”

Elizabeth smiled. She knew why Will had made the odd request. Will was waiting until Mary and William’s wedding in late August to make a gift of the horse to them. Charles had purchased a small trap for them, and Papa purchased a pony to pull it for Mary when Bartholomew was engaged with William. There was a local squire in the next village over, whose children had outgrown their pony, and the man wished for the beast to have a kind and undemanding home. Mary would be able to to easily travel about the parish on her business as the parson’s wife, and William would have Bartholomew to do the same, and to help Mr Bennet with estate matters. Mr Bingley would offer to keep them in the stables at Netherfield for the duration of his stay in Meryton. The parsonage was very near to Netherfield. Mary and Mr Collins would only need to send a maid over to request their horse or pony and cart, and a stable boy would bring it directly, saving them the expense of feeding and housing the animals, and the work of their upkeep. Mr Bingley told Jane that it was his pleasure to make such an offer, and that it would be his particular contribution to the parish.

William Bennet had changed a great deal in manner since December. He was competent on his horse, and had learned a great deal about manners, propriety, and gentlemanly conduct from his cousins and the gentlemen from Netherfield. Mr Bennet and Mr Darcy were constantly giving him reading material, including agricultural texts, history, theology, works of fiction, and even a few translated classics, much of which was beyond what he could fathom, but he did his very best. He and Mary read voraciously in their spare time, and discussed what they read with Mr Bennet, or even sometimes had little

group debates with Elizabeth and Darcy which led to very lively conversation.

He spent much of his time helping Mr Bennet. He knew all of the tenants, and visited them often. When he was not about parish business, he was learning to become the de facto steward of Longbourn. Mr Bennet admitted that due to William's enthusiasm, and Mr Bennet's newfound desire to improve the estate for Mary and her children, that there was a good probability that the estate would see an increase in profit come the next harvest. William was tireless, and Mr Bennet was hard put not to be swept away by his enthusiasm.

William could still be a little silly at times, particularly when meeting new acquaintances, and could sometimes be overly friendly or condescending. Mary would put a gentle pressure on his arm in these cases, and he would pause and modulate his tone or behaviour. Mr Bennet often bemoaned the loss of the old Mr Collins, and the amusement he had once enjoyed at the young man's expense. William had even lost some weight, with all of the work and running about that he did for the estate and the parish. Having shed a great deal of his own self importance, he was less demanding to his kitchen maid about his meals, and so his figure benefited.

Mary was also learning and improving day by day. She spent a great time in the kitchen, and the cook said that Miss Mary could replace her soon enough. She also spent time with Mrs Hill and the maids, learning exactly how the work of the house was done, so that she might be of assistance to the kitchen maid and young boy that would come daily to help at the parsonage. She also learned a great deal from the tenants and parishioners. She had taken to carrying a bit of paper and a pencil to write down all the advice she was given by women who had been running their own homes for years, and most of it sounded very helpful.

"Will you break your fast with us?" Mary asked her beau, as she poured him a cup of tea.

"Just a cup, thank you, my dear," he said gratefully. "Miss Eddy left me a scotch egg, and I enjoyed a muffin and some marvellous preserves with it not an hour ago. Bennet, I am on

my way over to Mr Blackwell's farm to see about that barn roof. Do you wish to join me?"

"No, William, I believe you can be trusted to manage the problem. I believe I shall play the gentleman today, and remain in my book room. You have tricked me out too often since you arrived, I have neglected my classics. Matlock sent me an interesting text last week about the Roman Empire, you may enjoy my share of the resolution," Mr Bennet declined as he rose to find his book room. William finished his tea, then bid his sweetheart goodbye, kissed Mrs Bennet's cheek, and went along on his business.

CHAPTER 22



*Rosings Park,
Hunsford, Kent*

MISS BENNET,

I find that I must travel to Eastbourne to seek the advice of a doctor who might be of assistance to me. In light of the ruined prospects for the summer, which you and my nieces anticipated, you will accompany me. Georgiana and Lady Priscilla will collect you in Darcy's carriage on the third of May, and we will travel to Eastbourne from Rosings Park. Darcy will join us later, as you had all originally planned. If she has earned the distinction, and your mother approves, your youngest sister may accompany you. Or, even if she has not earned it, in which case, tell your mother to send her anyway, and I will see what I can make of her. Miss Bingley proved a challenge, but she polished up well enough.

LADY CATHERINE DE Bourgh

LYDIA HAD IMPROVED GREATLY, though she was often still loud and over enthusiastic. Her mother had eventually allowed her to accompany Jane and Elizabeth to Netherfield often to spend time with Kitty and Miss Darcy. With four older sisters grown up, three of them trusted implicitly by their parents, and with the good examples available at Netherfield in Lady Priscilla, Georgiana, and her companion Mrs Annesley, Mr and Mrs Bennet decided that since Mr Bennet had Lydia's academic education firmly in hand, they would wait to consider hiring a governess, and see what Lydia could learn from the other

women willing to teach her. She was never taken anywhere that she might encounter single men other than those from Netherfield. She attended no events, instead, when the Bennets and the Netherfield party attended events that Georgiana did not, Lydia went to Netherfield and spent the evening with that young lady and her companion, or sometimes those ladies joined her at Longbourn. Though Lydia was still often loud and crass, Mr Darcy still felt that her friendship drew Georgiana out of her shell. Georgie knew better than to act as Lydia did, indeed, she would never draw such attention to herself. She understood that *she* was meant to be setting an example of good manners for the girl, and that in turn, Lydia was to give Georgie some courage and liveliness.

Everyone's time had been well spent since Mary's engagement dinner. William still held the Hunsford living, but he gave his curate a respectable raise, and Lady Catherine allowed that young man to move into the parsonage. The man was a bachelor, of course, and so he managed very well with only one kitchen maid, particularly considering that Rosings Park's home farm and his parishioners kept him well stocked in poultry, dairy, and vegetables. William was managing about the same at Meryton's parsonage as he prepared for his marriage. He had found a competent curate to assist him in Meryton, who was boarding for free with him at the parsonage until the wedding, then the man would occupy one of Netherfield's cottages, also for free, by the generosity of Sir Henry and Mr Bingley. The young man was a year or two younger than William, and also full of energy. He would be an enormous help to William as he learned his duties in Meryton.

Jane had thrown herself into teaching Mr Bingley what she knew about caring for tenants, and what the man learned from Darcy and Mr Bennet was indispensable. Sir Henry was not intending to sell Netherfield, his nephew would inherit it, but Bingley had toured the Great House at Stoke with Jane on two occasions, and planned to rent it for a year when his lease at Netherfield was up if he married Jane. If the two of them liked it well enough by the end of the lease, he would make the owner an offer. The behaviour of Mrs Bennet and her younger sisters had settled enough that Jane no longer felt it necessary

to live too far away from her home, and Bingley had no objection; he liked the Bennets.

The two had begun to accompany Darcy and Elizabeth throughout the winter on their early morning walks, it being an excellent time to talk alone with one another about matters of importance without being observed by their families and neighbours. Jane and Bingley spoke of everything, how many children they might wish to have, how much time they might like to spend in town, how much travelling they might do as a married couple, how they wished their children to be raised, whether they would attend schools or be educated at home, their feelings on gambling, mistresses, and other vices, the possibility of sharing one bedroom as a married couple, how much they would like to see of their families, how much should be provided for daughters and younger sons, and how their fortune would be allocated upon their deaths. All of these matters were discussed, and more, for Bingley and Jane were both determined that they would be in perfect harmony with their mate, and left nothing to chance.

Darcy and Elizabeth also believed that one could not possibly know enough about their future mates before they wed. They discussed everything that Jane and Bingley spoke of and more, for Darcy and Elizabeth were more complicated souls than Jane and Bingley. Jane and Bingley were simple, happy people, who did not read extensively, and were content with tending estates, riding, and other genteel pursuits such as embroidery, or billiards, in Bingley's case. Darcy and Elizabeth were both excessively intelligent. They both read extensively on many subjects, had interests that they liked to discuss at length, followed current events and the news with attentiveness, and required intellectual stimulation to feed their souls. In addition to all of the practical matters pertaining to marriage and raising a family, they also discussed their intellectual and philanthropic interests in detail, each relishing the other's contribution to their deepening friendship.

Elizabeth believed that she was nearly ready for Darcy to ask for her hand, and hoped that he would this summer in Eastbourne. She had decided that he was exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His

understanding and temper, though unlike her own, was the answer to all of her desires. It would be a union that must be greatly advantageous to both. By her ease and liveliness, his reserve might be softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she would benefit from an education of great importance. When he left for Derbyshire with his cousin and sister, just a few days after Lady Catherine and Anne departed for Kent, the two began a correspondence through his sister and her father, neither of whom felt the need to open their missives to read them. Emboldened by the safety of complete privacy, and the feeling of liberation the distance gave them, they quickly began to express their romantic feelings freely. It had not taken them long to begin pining for one another, and their yearning led them both to convey quite openly the depths of their feelings. She had already decided that when he asked, she would accept him. She was looking forward to making him aware of her feelings on the matter, and encouraging him to proceed when he was ready when they met this summer by the seaside.

The visit to London had occurred in January, and had been a magical time for the courting couples. Elizabeth, Jane, and Mary spent one month on Gracechurch Street with their Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, while Darcy and Bingley spent one month at Darcy House. Mr Collins spent two weeks at Darcy House as well, while Mr Stringer looked after the parish for a short time before he departed for Stevenage. Mr Collins was in awe of the lifestyle enjoyed by Mr Darcy and even Mr Bingley, who was reported to be only half as rich. The two households attended the opera and the theatre, Vauxhall, the museums, and Gunters. They also treated Mrs Gardiner's children to an outing at the Royal Menagerie. When Mr Collins returned to Meryton, Mary spent a fortnight shopping for her trousseau, while the other two ladies went on outings daily with their beaux. The two households dined together almost every night, as well as with the Viscount Carlisle and his wife, and a few of Darcy's closest connections. They attended two incredible balls, Jane and Elizabeth had been loaned jewels from the Darcy collection, and the ladies felt like princesses by the time they returned to Meryton. Mary, still modest and pious,

refused the loan of any jewels. The visit had been a marvellous opportunity for the young people to experience some interesting activities together by day, as well as some magical moments by night.

* * *

ELIZABETH HAD the joy of seeing her best friend wed just before leaving Hertfordshire. In late February, a Mr Knightley arrived in Meryton and visited Mr Phillips. A widow was moving south with her young family, and was in the market to buy a small estate near London. Mrs Barton was the daughter of a gentleman who had married a tradesman. His eldest son from a previous marriage had inherited his business, but Mrs Barton had been left a generous sum, and instructions to purchase a small estate on which to raise their younger son and daughter. Ten year old Dorothy Barton had been left ten thousand pounds for her dowry, and her brother, eight year old Arthur, would inherit the estate upon his mother's death. Dorothy had a lung complaint that never exposed itself outside of Manchester, Mrs Barton maintained that it was the dust of the cotton mills that caused the problem, that and the colder climate of the north. Mrs Barton's sister was married to a gentleman from Ware, so the warmer climate of Meryton and the proximity to her sister was very attractive to Mrs Barton. Abominable attics deemed irrelevant, Purvis Lodge was purchased, and Mr Barton's friend, Mr Knightley, who was also the trustee of their fortune, spent a month in Meryton accepting shipments of the family's possessions and new furniture, and creating accounts for Mrs Barton with all of the shops.

Mr and Mrs Phillips were social people, and would not hear of the man staying in the village without some society. He was invited everywhere during his time in Hertfordshire. Mrs Bennet was truly at a loss at how to behave around the man when she had no daughter to throw at him. Hedgerows or no hedgerows, even Mrs Bennet agreed that a man her own age was far too old for seventeen year old Kitty, and Lydia would not be out again for some time yet. There was no need to rush the younger girls, considering the prospects of the elder. Mrs

Bennet was certain that both of her eldest daughters would accept their gentleman when they were asked, and even if one of them *were* so stubborn and foolish as to decline, the other would surely see sense and accept. Mr Knightley dined at Longbourn, Lucas Lodge, Hays Park, and every other house in town in the evenings, and seemed to be quickly drawn to Charlotte Lucas. All through the month of March the two seemed to find endless excuses to run into one another, and they spoke constantly when in company.

Elizabeth found the man rather dry and stern, but then again, Fitzwilliam was stern, and she found the joy in him and drew it out with ease. Perhaps Mr Knightley had a joyful side as well. He seemed to light up when in conversation with her friend, who glowed and looked lovelier than ever under his attention. One evening at a party at Lucas Lodge, Elizabeth did not eavesdrop on purpose, but the party was crowded, even for one of Sir William's gatherings. It was a rather intimate conversation to be having in such a venue, and Elizabeth could not help but overhear. Charlotte had just made a joke about how many ladies Mr Knightley must have disappointed in Highbury over the years to make it to one and forty without ever having been married.

"In Meryton you would have been run out of the village, sir," Charlotte teased. "The matrons are everything welcoming to you now, but that is because you have not been plaguing their nerves for years with your refusal to select a wife. Poor Mr William Goulding is but a year my junior, and he is speaking of leaving the county to pay an extended visit to Bath, and not return until after he weds. Five years it has been since he came down from Cambridge, and it is obvious he has no affinity for anyone in the village. The matrons have begun to snub him cruelly. They do not like that their daughters are not good enough for him."

"Poor man," he said. "There is every chance the man is waiting for your sister, or some other girl hereabouts to be old enough. Tell them to give him time."

"You sound like you speak from experience," Charlotte observed.

“I do. There is a lady back home, who I thought had an ethereal beauty about her when she entered womanhood,” he confessed. “Please understand, I have not been coveting this girl through her growth. She is beautiful, but there was something about her that I thought might grow to be incomparable. The lady has been old enough to wed for some three or four years, but something has prevented me from asking for her. As much as I admire her, I did not come to love her romantically as she grew up the way I thought I might. Even as a woman she is immature, and it is not always attractive upon her.”

“If she is only three or four years grown up, she will certainly mature a great deal more in only a few years,” pointed out Charlotte. “I know I matured greatly by the time I was three and twenty.”

“No. My ideal of her as a woman does not meet with reality, and it is my own fault. I had no right to create any such ideal. It was a foolish fancy on my part. She is not a bad person, her heart is in the right place, and she has good intentions. But I do not like her manner of entertaining herself by playing with the feelings and futures of her neighbours. She treats all around her – her friends, her governess, the local spinsters, every young man she meets – as if they are dolls or playthings. She attempts to direct their hearts, and is shocked if she is wrong or they go their own way. We are family. Her sister is married to my brother. I have spent too much time with her in her youth to see her romantically now. All of the chastising I have done regarding her behaviour does not incline me towards love. I cannot see her as anything but a younger sister. It has been some time since I accepted that I wish to marry a grown up lady, with a true woman’s heart. Someone closer to my age, who treats others with genuine compassion and friendship. A woman I might be proud to share my name with.”

It was blatantly obvious that Mr Knightley was informing Charlotte that he believed he had found his match. His voice held more warmth and emotion than Elizabeth had heard in it since he had arrived in Meryton.

Charlotte flushed prettily, and said, “Whoever she is will be a lucky woman.”

“The good fortune shall all be mine if she will only agree,” Mr Knightley said with great feeling. The pair watched the young people dancing on the other side of the room for a moment before the man seemed to gather his courage and spoke again. “May I request the honour of a private audience with you tomorrow, Miss Lucas?”

“You may,” answered Charlotte happily.

Mr Knightley kissed her hand, making her blush again, and left her. Seconds later, Elizabeth barreled into her, hugging her best friend and spinning her around with joy. “I knew how it would be!” Elizabeth cried, then embraced her friend again. The following evening, Sir William Lucas announced the betrothal of his eldest daughter at the Meryton assembly. Charlotte danced every dance, and was radiant with joy. Mr Knightley suddenly no longer seemed as dry and stern. The man smiled animatedly and was profuse with his thanks as the locals gave him their congratulations, and complimented him on being the fortunate man to see what a jewel there was to be found in their Miss Lucas.

Elizabeth stood up with Charlotte in Meryton’s church the second week in April, as her cousin led the couple in their vows and pronounced them husband and wife. Charlotte was more beautiful than she had ever looked before, and Mr George Knightley was ecstatic as he handed his wife up into his carriage after the wedding breakfast as the couple departed for Bath for two months before going to Highbury.

CHAPTER 23



Paris - 1554

NOSTRADAMUS ENTERED A DARKENED apartment in Paris. “*You survived!*” said a man dressed all in black in French as he rose from a semi-recumbent position. “*Congratulations, my friend. I had my doubts.*”

“*You had **your** doubts! I was certain I was to be beheaded for my predictions regarding the royal family!*” Nostradamus exclaimed.

“*So what did she want?*” asked his friend, moving slowly over to a table where a great book of calculations and predictions was laid out.

“*She wishes me to move to the palace, and create horoscopes for her and her children,*” said Nostradamus. “*Should I go?*”

“*You have very little choice. Either you do as she says, or she has you killed,*” answered his friend. “*See if you can get her to let you look at her boy’s ears, they need tending.*”

“*She wants you too,*” said Nostradamus.

“*Me?*” gasped the other. “*Whatever for?*”

“*She heard I have a friend who is skilled in medicine and transmutation,*” said Nostradamus.

* * *

THE TWO MEN entered the throne room at the French Court. “*Nostradamus!*” the page announced as the first man approached the throne and bowed low to Catherine de Medici.

“*Your name, sir?*” the page whispered. The man dressed all in black whispered in his ear, and the page straightened his head and announced, “*The Comte St Germain.*”

CHAPTER 24



Georgiana and Lady Priscilla arrived at Netherfield a few days before the end of April. Mr Bingley was still in London, but the ladies made use of his house for a few days, and socialised with the Bennets before continuing on to Rosings Park. Lydia was in high spirits at what she called her liberation. Elizabeth hoped that she would be equal to controlling the girl, but her father had told her that if her youngest sister gave her, Mrs Annesley, or Lady Catherine the slightest trouble, to put her in Lady Catherine's carriage and send her straight home.

Lydia's spirits were irrepressible, but that would likely never change. Despite that, Elizabeth was still impressed by her sister's progress these last months. She spoke more intelligently now that Papa had taken her education in hand, and she was learning how to think rationally. A month after her first visit, Lydia had demanded the carriage for the day that she might visit Cousin Harriet and Sister Mary Frances again. Mrs Bennet had objected, she had another engagement that day, but Mr Bennet, impressed by Lydia's interest and compassion for the ladies, granted her request. Aunt Phillips petitioned to join them, she had missed the last visit, and Lydia dragged Jane and Elizabeth with them. Elizabeth had no objection, she was curious about this mysterious cousin. Mr Darcy had offered the use of his carriage so that Mrs Bennet's engagement might not be interrupted, and he and Mr Bingley escorted the ladies to Ashwell on horseback.

Cousin Harriet again believed Lydia to be her grandmother, and she thought that Jane was Fanny Bennet

from her youth. She ignored Elizabeth completely, seeming uncomfortable about her. Sister Mary Frances explained that this was likely because Elizabeth resembled her father's people, and Cousin Harriet had no lady in her memory to associate Elizabeth's features with. She likewise tended to forget all about Mr Bennet whenever they were not in company. It had been many years since she had met anyone new besides the occasional novice, and they all looked the same to her. Miss Holbrook was exceedingly happy to sit with Lydia and Jane, and pepper them with questions about events they had attended recently, and clothes they had ordered at the dressmaker. She tired far more quickly this time, presumably due to there being more visitors.

The ladies decided not to come more than three at a time to visit Cousin Harriet in the future. Elizabeth had not considered the visit wasted, even though Miss Gardiner had not engaged with her. She had enjoyed a very friendly conversation with Sister Mary Frances, and had been fascinated to hear about her life. Elizabeth thought that Sister Mary Frances deserved a particular visitor of her own occasionally. It was only appropriate for the nun to receive correspondence very infrequently. Once or twice a year perhaps, unless she was conveying information about Harriet, but Elizabeth vowed to visit and write to the woman when she could, and she was proud of Lydia for caring about the two women, and wanting to bring them the comfort of family visits.

Lydia had applied herself with fresh vigour to her sewing. She was creating a quilt for her chest for when she married, as many girls did, but now she began a new one which would be a gift for Harriet when it was finished. She gave it a great deal more attention than she gave her *own* quilt, and in order to see it done quickly, Jane and Mrs Bennet often helped her sew squares. It was a simple pattern, something not complicated to assemble, but Lydia wanted to give her cousin something new and lovely to add to her comfort. She also embroidered a lovely shawl for the lady. She fretted that she could not give any gifts to Sister Mary Frances, and the magnitude of the sacrifice the woman had made for her sister weighed upon Lydia often.

She had fussed a great deal about Harriet being moved to a room with a window on her second visit, but Sister Mary Frances explained that when Harriet had a window, she attempted to escape from it, thinking she was meeting a lover, even when she was not on the ground floor. For her safety, she could only sleep in a room with no window, but there was a lovely and bright parlour in the castle for her particular use. The reason she had not been in that parlour during their first two visits was because of the time of day they had arrived, she had already spent the morning downstairs, and then retired back up to her room to rest for the afternoon. Lydia planned to leave earlier for their next visit, that she might see this parlour, and assess its comfort for herself.

* * *

THE PARTY of ladies was in high spirits the entire way to Kent. They travelled straight through, instead of stopping in London at their Uncle Gardiner's. They rested at Bromley, where her ladyship had arranged a private dining room and a generous luncheon for them. Lady Catherine and William had corresponded about it, and the curate from Hunsford met them at Bromley, and escorted them on the last leg of their journey, to doubly ensure their safety while dining at the inn.

They arrived an hour before dinner, famished, and ready to wash and change as soon as possible. They were overjoyed to see Anne, who had become a great deal more firm and forceful with her mother when necessary during her stay at Netherfield. While Lady Catherine had been assisting Lady Matlock to instruct Miss Bingley, so too were Lord and Lady Matlock and Darcy working upon Lady Catherine to be less domineering with Anne. They were all devastated that she was ill. She was difficult, but she was their family, and they all cared for her. But she was made to see that if her time *was* to be short, that it was all the more important for Anne to assert her independence. Anne had pensioned off her companion, Mrs Jenkinson, and taken over much of the running of the house.

Anne and Lady Catherine greeted them on the steps as they were handed down from the carriage. "Welcome, all of you! Was your journey quite comfortable? You look like you

have grown again, Georgiana, you must stop that. How are you, Priscilla?" exclaimed Anne as she embraced them all in their turn.

"You made excellent time, we did not hope to see you before dinner. The change of horses must have increased the speed of your journey, those were my horses I sent for your change at Bromley," said Lady Catherine as she looked on in approval as the ladies displayed their curtsies to her. "Miss Bennet, that is a handsome travelling gown, you have excellent taste. I predict that when my nephew's funds are added to your discernment, you will be well dressed indeed. Miss Lydia, that curtsey was very nicely done. Come inside all of you." Lady Catherine was pale and gaunt. She had grown rather thin since leaving Meryton.

Due to the closeness of the dinner hour, instead of repairing to the drawing room for tea before going up, their hostesses led them directly upstairs where they were installed in their rooms. There was hot water for washing, and Elizabeth felt the benefit of being thus refreshed and more presentable when she had made good use of it and changed her clothes. A maid had been assigned to help her, but Elizabeth dismissed her for the evening, needing no assistance with the simple but elegant evening gown that she wore downstairs an hour later.

The ladies all entered the drawing room within a few moments of one another, and they barely had time to speak before the butler, Mr Torrens, entered to announce dinner. Once they were seated and the first course had been served, Lady Catherine opened the conversation. "How is my brother, Priscilla? Is he minding the doctor? Reginald was always difficult. Only I could keep him in his bed if he was injured. He broke his collarbone when he was five, and his arm when he was nine."

"Father will ever be thus. Thankfully, Ashley and his family came north to keep an eye on estate matters, so Papa is the recipient of my mother's undivided attention," Lady Priscilla answered mirthfully, referring to her brother, the Viscount Carlisle.

“Your mother knows well how to manage your father. He did well the day he chose Lady Eleanor Ashley,” said Lady Catherine approvingly. “Miss Lydia, have you mastered an instrument yet?”

“I have not,” Lydia replied, glancing at Elizabeth nervously. “I have little interest in the pianoforte, and we have no violin. I have been applying myself to my sewing at home. I am making a quilt for our elderly cousin who lives in Ashwell.”

“We will bring the harp with us to Eastbourne, and Georgiana will begin your instruction. You play pianoforte beautifully, niece, but I fear you neglect your practise at the harp. Miss Lydia, I have ordered a new harp for our music room here. The one we have is old, and I will have the best, even if I do not play myself. If you take to the instrument, it will be yours to return home with you, for we will have no further use for it. I admit I enjoy listening to the harp greatly, so I will take great pleasure in listening to you both practise.”

Georgiana did not at all neglect her practise at the harp, at least when she had one at her disposal, which she had not at Netherfield. She had, however, come during her time there to just let her aunt’s words wash over her without taking them as criticism. Georgie had learnt that while her aunt’s words were not always presented tactfully, they were always well-meant, and that her aunt approved of her thoroughly, even if she seemed stern or critical. Georgie was adept at the harp, and had no objection at all to helping Lydia, and said so. Lydia thanked Lady Catherine for her consideration and generosity, a little daunted by such expectations, but willing to put forth the effort. She had never considered the harp, because they never had one. No one in Meryton did. Lydia thought she might not mind the distinction of being the only lady in the village to play.

“Elizabeth, I am determined to bring my phaeton to Eastbourne with us. I do love to drive, but Mama fears me driving alone outside of the lanes around Rosings. Do say you will join me on the trip there,” Anne begged.

“Of course I will. Lady Catherine, I was a passenger in Mr Bingley’s little trap with Anne several times in Hertfordshire, I am confident that her skills are equal to the journey,” Elizabeth assured the two ladies.

“Aunt, tell me of this doctor in Eastbourne,” Lady Priscilla demanded suddenly. “Has he some miracle treatment that might help you?”

“It is more likely that he is a butcher, but Anne insists that I go, and I cannot deny her,” said Lady Catherine. “She and Darcy have been sneaking about researching doctors and treatments, and they insist this man is the best. I do not believe I will agree to the ghastly operation this surgeon is said to perform, but I will go and receive his advice and take it under consideration, if it will ease Anne’s mind.”

“I want my mother to live; that would ease my mind,” said Anne with an edge to her voice. It was obvious to everyone that this was not the first time the subject had been discussed. “There is no point in hearing advice if you do not go with an open mind to the possibility of taking it.”

“You are asking too much, Anne. ‘Tis mutilation,” her mother said sternly. “You threw away all of your potions and tonics at Netherfield, and declared that you were a grown woman, and would do as you wish with your health and body. Pray, extend to me the same consideration.”

The table was hushed for a few moments. It was not proper to speak of in detail, but all of the women at the table knew that Lady Catherine had a cancer of the breast. It was a terrifying disease from which women died painful and horrible deaths. There were whispers of procedures of mutilation carried out by specialists in the cities. Mutilations that *might* give the patient a few more years, occasionally longer, but were carried out while the patient was awake, for there was no opium strong enough to sedate a person for such horrors. Few women underwent the knife, and those who were brave enough did not always survive it. The idea of escorting Lady Catherine to Eastbourne to consult with a physician about such a procedure was a sobering thought.

Lady Catherine spoke again. “Do not let my troubles cast a shadow upon our journey or our meal, ladies. I must admit to you all that once I allowed myself to accept that Anne will be safe when I am gone – and that my time is limited, and I must make the most of what is left – I came to like all of you, and learned to enjoy your company a great deal while visiting Meryton. That is why I invited all of you in particular to join me. You girls bring me comfort and courage, particularly you, Miss Bennet. Georgiana, you bring me the comfort I once received from my dear sister. I am grateful that you all consented to join me.”

CHAPTER 25



Two days later, the merry party of ladies were on their way to Eastbourne, with Priscilla, Georgiana, and Lydia keeping Lady Catherine company in her carriage, and Anne and Elizabeth following in the phaeton. Georgiana's carriage followed with the luggage. The distance was just over forty miles, but it was made easily with horse changes. A full carriage pulled by two horses might have only made the distance of thirty miles in a day, but Lady Catherine's carriage and four made light work of the trip, and Anne's neat phaeton and two had no trouble keeping up. Lady Catherine insisted that once the horses changed, and Anne was no longer familiar with the beasts pulling her carriage, that the two young ladies repair to her carriage with the others, and to leave the rest of the drive to the grooms. Anne's horses would follow them to Eastbourne. Elizabeth and Anne had no objection. They had enjoyed the adventure, but after stopping for a rest and a meal while the horses were changed, they were all too pleased to join the other ladies in the carriage, and to have some new conversation.

Lady Catherine had rented an enormous house. She had been unsure of how long they would stay, or how many relations might turn up, so she ensured that it would be large enough for anyone who travelled to visit them. The house even had a bachelor's wing, miles away from the family wing where the ladies were housed, making it more appropriate for Darcy to stay in the house while courting Elizabeth. The house was perhaps a half mile from the sea, and the delights of the town. The ladies dined together and retired early, some

planning to rise early and begin attending to the pleasures of their new residence immediately. Elizabeth was aching to see the chalk cliffs and the sea, never having done so before, and Lydia was no less eager. Lydia was eager enough to be willing to walk out with Elizabeth at dawn. Georgiana and Lady Priscilla, having visited the coast before, intended to sleep a little later, but would ride out to the cliffs later in the day, both eager to employ their pencils to the scenery.

Anne had promised each of the ladies a drive in her phaeton in their turn, one per afternoon, and the women planned their adventures with excitement. Lady Catherine was rather more sober, for her adventure in Eastbourne was to be rather more solemn, but she was glad to see the delight of the young women, and took heart from their enthusiasm and company.

Elizabeth and Lydia returned from their walk the following morning barely in time for breakfast, blowsy, and in fine spirits. Elizabeth had much to write to Jane about, and Lydia wished Kitty might have been invited to see the place. Her sister, who had recently rediscovered an interest in drawing, would have loved the views they had discovered this morning. Elizabeth wished she might walk to such a place every day, though she acknowledged that the proximity to the coast must be bitterly cold in winter. They described their adventure to their companions as they ate, then the ladies discussed their day. Georgiana and Lady Priscilla would go in the carriage to the cliffs and begin some sketches. Anne, Elizabeth, and Lydia would spend the morning with Lady Catherine, who wished to visit the market town and the assembly rooms. Later, in the afternoon, Elizabeth would go for a drive with Anne in her phaeton.

The women enjoyed their visit to the town, which was small and not at all the equal of Ramsgate or Brighton, though this meant nothing to Lydia and Elizabeth, who had never seen either. There were only a few genteel amusements, for Eastbourne had not received the attention of society yet. Only those who came to visit a particular physician, or who wished to avoid the crowds of the more popular seaside resorts visited.

There was a small theatre, and Lady Catherine said that when Darcy arrived, that they might go.

The ladies visited the library, and each purchased a subscription. They visited the Assembly Rooms, and Lady Catherine purchased a subscription for their household. Lady Catherine met two of her acquaintances there, people she had not met since her husband was alive, and the de Bourghs still travelled to London for the season. Sir Alfred Fletcher was a gentleman who had been friends with Sir Lewis. He had two daughters already married, and his youngest, The Honourable Miss Amanda Fletcher, was a sickly girl who had come to take the cure of bathing in the sea. Mr Woodhouse was a man whose late wife had come out with Lady Catherine, though their families had lost touch when the woman died. This was on account of Mr Woodhouse becoming a hypochondriac when his wife passed, turning reclusive, and imagining himself ill for years. His eldest daughter had escaped by marrying one of the only two suitable gentlemen in the vicinity of her village. His youngest, Emma, had remained with her father for lack of other opportunities, and out of love and obligation. Thus was their life, until Miss Woodhouse became ill, and all thoughts for himself left Mr Woodhouse. He was determined to do anything to help her, and had brought her to Eastbourne to take the sea air and consult a specialist.

Anne also planned to sea bathe as often as possible. She had been building her strength since visiting Hertfordshire, and she was interested to see what the cure would do for her. She made plans to visit the young women, and to take the cure with them the following day. Elizabeth and Lydia were happy to agree to join them. They none of them spoke of their reason for visiting Eastbourne in the company of their new acquaintances. They all knew that Lady Catherine had an appointment to visit the physician in two weeks. Anne was determined to accompany her mother and would brook no argument. They did not speak of the event, but it loomed over them all like a dreaded shadow, and they were all filled with trepidation of the choice their hostess was contemplating.

* * *

ELIZABETH quite unintentionally became a hero in the little town on the very first afternoon. She was exiting the assembly room with Lady Catherine, Anne, and Lydia, when suddenly there was a yapping in the street, followed by a woman's scream.

"Charlie! Stop!" screamed a lady on the other side of the street, as a small puppy ran into the road, followed by a small boy, directly into the path of an oncoming cart.

Elizabeth jumped into action immediately, with Lydia close behind. There was an ear piercing scream from the lady as Elizabeth rushed into the street and snatched the boy to her as Lydia scooped up the puppy he was chasing, and the ladies drew back just in time to be missed by the pounding of the horses hooves and the terrifying wheels of the carriage as the beasts reared up..

The man driving the carriage jumped down and began to rage at the boy, who began to sob as his mother rushed across the street and swept him into her arms. Lady Catherine began to berate the driver emphatically for driving too fast in the middle of the market town, and when the boy's mother took up the charge as well, the man quickly boarded his cart and drove away.

Introductions were exchanged with the assistance of a new acquaintance from the assembly room, and they learned that their new friend was Lady Gordon, the wife of Sir Charles Gordon, the local magistrate, and the little boy was her youngest son, Charlie. Lydia placed the puppy, dubbed Sir Galahad, back into the arms of young Charlie, and advised him to obtain a proper lead for his young hound. Lady Gordon declared that her family would be indebted to Elizabeth forever, and the ladies made promises to exchange invitations.

The next days followed nearly the same pattern. Elizabeth and Lydia would walk out early in the morning, then join the household for breakfast. Lydia was not particular about their destination, but there were two routes Elizabeth preferred. One was along the cliffs, and to see the Martello Tower, also known in the area as the Wish Tower. The other was rather deeper into the countryside, where there was an imposing

stone castle that the locals said was actually inhabited by a reclusive elderly woman of foreign descent. The grounds were not well kept, and there did not seem to be any harm in going close enough to see the great building, which was an incredible sight. The stonework seemed in good repair, though they never saw any servants outdoors. The locals said that orders came from the castle to the shops by a local boy who lived in the cottages, and deliveries were left at the back door, but that the farms attached to the place were not inhabited or in use. There were many squatters on the property, but its owner never had them evicted. Elizabeth and Lydia both found the edifice to be romantic, and made up stories about the reclusive lady who lived within, to amuse themselves as they walked.

After breakfast, some of the ladies would accompany Lady Catherine in whatever endeavour she wished to pursue, the others would go sea bathing with their new friends, or out to draw or enjoy the scenery. Georgiana and Priscilla enjoyed donkey rides, and all of the ladies enjoyed parading about on the beach with their parasols. Each day, Georgiana and Lydia would practise the harp. Lydia surprisingly showed promise very quickly in the endeavour, and was wild to become proficient. She had been abominable at pianoforte, and swore off instruments when she was a very young girl, but now she had found something at which she might excel. Lady Catherine enjoyed their playing, and as promised, gifted the harp to Lydia to take home with her. By the time they returned to Rosings, the new instrument would have been delivered. Even Anne was inspired to make an effort at the harp, and was surprised that it was not as difficult as she expected.

Late each afternoon before dressing for dinner, Lady Catherine took her rest, for her condition exhausted her, and she could no longer make it through the day without lying down for some time before the evening meal. Each day, the ladies visited the assembly rooms, the tea house, the confectioner, the book shop, or haberdashery. Each of the Bennet daughters had come with an incredibly generous sum from their father, though Lydia's was entrusted to Elizabeth for

safekeeping, and close budgeting, for Lydia could spend any sum in under a week, if she were not prudent.

Sir Charles and Lady Gordon hosted a dinner party in honour of Elizabeth and Lydia's heroic rescue of young Charlie. Elizabeth was embarrassed by the attention, though Lydia was not, and told and retold the story many times with great relish. Lady Gordon was an estimable woman in her early thirties, she quite reminded Elizabeth of Charlotte, with her practical nature and good humoured disposition.

There were dance assemblies every other week, but Lady Catherine preferred to wait for Darcy before attending them. They attended the assembly rooms by day, and not long after arriving, had been introduced to several matrons and their offspring, and a few gentlemen and noblemen. Lady Catherine preferred not to do too much socialising, and so they exchanged invitations mostly with the households that she already knew. The others, Lady Catherine was content to receive calls from but once a week. Two of the young noblemen were persistent; Lord Albert Swinton paid a great deal of attention to Anne, which she ignored, and Lord Henry Russell, the Earl of Lennox seemed positively smitten with Priscilla, and was also ignored. The primary local nobleman was the Earl of Amesbury, who lived nearby at his estate, Harefield, with his wife and family of five sons who were rumoured to be wild. The ones who had not yet married were presumably all off gambling in the capital. His family never visited the assembly rooms, but the countess did send her card around to select noble visitors to the area, and so Lady Catherine and her household did call upon her at her invitation.

CHAPTER 26



One afternoon, the day before Lady Catherine was to meet the physician, Georgiana came to Elizabeth and said, “Lizzy, I know my brother would wish for me to tell someone. I believe I have seen Mr Wickham.”

“Are you certain, Georgie?” gasped Elizabeth.

“I believe so. I was in the phaeton with Anne today – she does go along at a terrific pace, does she not? She says exhilaration is essential to exercise the heart, and circulating the blood.”

“Do I not know it!” Elizabeth laughed. Anne did like to race quite a bit faster than she ought in her little contraption, and her mother would have a seizure if she ever saw, but driving had been Anne’s only activity for years, and she had a firm grasp on controlling her horses.

“I only saw him for a moment, but I was certain it was him. He was in uniform,” Georgiana continued. “I swear, I think he even saw me.”

“Well there are enough soldiers about to have made a mistake in identification, but I do not wish to doubt you,” said Elizabeth. There was a militia in Eastbourne, though the town was not manned as the coast had been in the past. British troops were preoccupied in the Americas currently, and Napoleon had turned his attention towards Russia. Tensions had been mounting in that direction for some time. Most of the current activity around the Wish Tower concerned smuggling. Elizabeth had a desire to tour the place properly for herself,

but had not yet had the opportunity. "We ought to write to Fitzwilliam and send it by express messenger. He would wish to know, immediately."

*Bourne House,
Eastbourne*

DEAREST F.

I beg a thousand pardons for not having written to you since leaving Rosings Park. Your aunt, even though we can see that her condition exhausts her, and she takes rest each afternoon, is otherwise indefatigable when she determines to be. Other than her complexion and having grown rather thin, she never shows her illness when we are out and about, and she has insisted upon going out every day for some hours before returning to rest before dinner. I wonder if she is trying to distract us from her worries, or herself. She retires early on the evenings that we do not dine with the Fletchers or the Woodhouses, and we younger ladies repair to Georgiana's and Priscilla's shared parlour, or they visit Lydia and I in ours, and we all make merry late into the night. It is a novel experience for Georgie and Priscilla. Though they are cousins, they are not so close in age as you and Col F, and have not often engaged in such shenanigans as Lydia and I are used to at home with so many sisters. Poor Anne has never engaged in a shenanigan in her life until she fell in with us. We shall turn the three of them into hoydens before you see them again.

Anne keeps us just as busy, she has continued her fondness for driving since we have arrived. We each go out with her in our turn, and she is quite enthusiastic about the excitement at careening about the village each day. When she is not driving, she is taking the cure, for she has discovered a great fondness for sea bathing. Your aunt's appointment with the physician is tomorrow, She is excessively outraged that he has refused to see her at Bourne House. She must travel to him, and she feels it is a degradation to her rank. Reformed though she might be, she still likes the distinction of rank to be preserved. Anne will brook no argument, she insists that Lady Catherine must go anyway. The two seem to be on the verge of some terrific battle. Lady Catherine abhors the idea of this doctor's cure,

and I cannot blame her, but Anne is determined to preserve her mother's life at any cost.

As much as I desire to shower this message with expressions of adoration and flowery declarations of admiration, as we have previously enjoyed, I fear the worries for your aunt and another concern overshadow such wishes. I must inform you that Georgiana came to me today and confessed that she believes that she saw Mr Wickham here in the market town. She only had a moment to glimpse him, but she was certain it was he, in uniform, and that he saw her for an instant as well. As you instructed us in case of any fears for our safety, we informed Georgiana's footman, Harry. He ensures us that he has sent to Darcy House for extra men to watch over Georgiana and the rest of us. Your sister has solemnly promised not to venture out alone, She will always have one or more of us with her, and at least two of your men.

I shall take a man with me and Lydia upon our morning walks. I do not wish for you to worry. It is possible that Georgie only saw a random soldier, and mistook his identity, but we shall take every precaution until you come to us. I long to see your face again. Will you not come to us, directly? Pray, ignore my selfishness. Of course Pemberley needs you. But do come, once you are at liberty. We would all of us rejoice in your arrival, none more joyfully than myself.

E.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Anne and her mother attended their appointment. Lady Catherine did not speak of the matter upon their return. Anne informed them that the doctor believed that Lady Catherine would benefit from his cure, but he did not work alone on these procedures, and he wished to consult the specialist who aided him in such endeavours. Lady Catherine was offended, because she believed both men ought to have been available from the start, and to drag the matter out so was unconscionable. Elizabeth understood her position. Lady Catherine was in a terrifying situation, and it *would* have been kinder of the doctor to have had this other man here from the beginning, so that her hostess did not have so long to wait. Lady Catherine was also greatly displeased by what she

considered to be the degradation of the examination, and irate that she must be imposed upon again in a similar manner. The doctor had assured Anne that he took no offence at her mother's outrage. This was not the first frightened noblewoman he had helped, and he assured her that Lady Catherine's feelings were perfectly natural.

Their hostess must wait another fortnight before this other doctor arrived, and her nerves were getting the better of her. She began to push herself beyond the limits of her strength, and the consequences made themselves known quickly. Lady Catherine and Anne argued daily in Lady Catherine's apartments; Anne insistent that her mother agree to the procedure carried out by the physician, Lady Catherine determined not to offend her body with such mutilation. Lady Catherine became stubborn very quickly, and stopped taking her rest in the afternoons, insisting that she was well, and that she needed no such measures. Anne was outraged that instead of taking better care of her health, that her mother was turning obstinate, and doing the very opposite.

* * *

THREE DAYS AFTER HER EXAMINATION, Elizabeth and Priscilla were with Lady Catherine on the beach, as Anne took the cure with Miss Amanda Fletcher. Priscilla did not enjoy sea bathing; Miss Woodhouse did not find it enjoyable either, but she did enjoy sitting upon the beach and warming herself in the sunshine. Lady Catherine had harangued her about freckles, but Mr Woodhouse insisted that the activity was good for his daughter, and whatever brought her pleasure, must be encouraged. She could have as many freckles as she liked, he insisted, as long as she felt well. Elizabeth enjoyed sea bathing very much, though not so much as to wish to leave her friend alone with Miss Woodhouse while she enjoyed herself. When they accompanied Priscilla and Miss Woodhouse, Elizabeth joined them on the beach for conversation, when Priscilla went to sketch with Georgiana or drive with Anne, Elizabeth joined the others in the bathing machines.

Elizabeth wanted to like Miss Woodhouse, but there was something not quite right about her illness, and Elizabeth did

not like her opinions on some subjects. She had said nothing, but it seemed that Miss Woodhouse was always more ill in the presence of her father. She was a bright young woman, if rather too conscious of rank. Elizabeth had learned quickly that Miss Woodhouse had felt rather proprietary about the matchmaking of her friend, Mr George Knightley, and had not deemed Charlotte worthy of him. She had said nothing specifically insulting, but she had made it clear that if *she* had set her sister's brother up in matrimony, it would have been with a proper wife of his own station. She spoke endlessly about her efforts in pairing up her other neighbours and acquaintances, and complained often about the ones who made their own paths.

Elizabeth did not appreciate the suggestion that her dearest friend was not good enough for the man she had married, and only Lady Catherine's friendship with the woman's father kept her from saying so quite openly. She and Priscilla both rolled their eyes when Miss Woodhouse had wondered aloud at Lady Catherine's approval of Darcy and Elizabeth's courtship. Miss Woodhouse suggested directly that Mr Darcy would be a better match for Priscilla, and that she ought to introduce Elizabeth to someone who would suit her position better. She had been trying to get the rector in their village paired off for some time.

"Mr Elton would do very well for Miss Elizabeth," she insisted, as Elizabeth and Priscilla wondered why Miss Woodhouse believed that they cared what she thought. "He is a very good looking man, and you seem like a sensible woman. You would do well for him, I think. I should have my father send for him."

"Since I have committed myself to a courtship already, it would be excessively inappropriate of me to consider such a scheme, Miss Woodhouse." Elizabeth rolled her eyes for the fortieth time since she sat down with the lady that day.

Before the young woman could begin to argue again about the merits of a connection of a man like Mr Darcy with his cousin Lady Priscilla, whose prior claim ought to be respected whether or not that lady was actually interested in him, there

was a commotion in the water, and on the beach near the shore. The younger ladies were sitting rather further back on the beach than Lady Catherine and Mr Woodhouse, and when Elizabeth heard shouts of alarm, she rushed to her hostess, along with Priscilla, leaving Miss Woodhouse quite on her own.

“Anne! Where is Anne! I cannot see her!” Lady Catherine was crying at the shoreline, as Mr Woodhouse attempted to calm her. The ladies in the water were panicking, the dippers hurried Miss Fletcher back into her bathing machine, as it was pulled quickly from the water, and the other dippers nearby began to search the waters. After several moments of hysterical crying, Lady Catherine collapsed on the shore.

“Wait!” Elizabeth shouted, pointing. “I see her! She has swam out farther than she ought!”

The man who supervised the dippers used a glass to look out over the waters, and confirmed that it was indeed Anne, alone, and much further out than she ought to have been, but she did not seem to be in distress. He passed the glass to Elizabeth, who peered into it, to see Anne swimming out to the horizon. Her friend suddenly stopped swimming, then turned back toward the shore, saw the crowd watching, and waved. She suddenly disappeared from view as she ducked beneath the waters, and Elizabeth shrieked in concern. A moment later, Anne emerged from the waters again, as she made her way back. About halfway, the dippers reached her, and dragged her back to the bathing machine.

Anne did not bother to change from her bathing costume before she tumbled out onto the sand when the machine emerged from the water. “Apparently one never forgets how to swim, I have not had such excitement since my father taught me when I was eight years old! Did you see how far I went, Lizzy? I cannot express how exhilarating that was! I was simply overcome with the urge to swim out to the horizon! I must practise before I do it again, I was nearly overcome with exhaustion on the way back! Did Mama see how far out I went? Where is my mother?”

Anne's face turned white as her eyes turned to the heap of burgundy silk at the edge of the water, a small crowd gathered round. "Mama!" she cried, rushing to her mother's side, heedless of the looks she was receiving due to her exposing herself, drenched, in her flannel bathing costume. "Mama, wake up! Mama, please!"

"We have sent a boy for the mayor, Miss de Bourgh, they say he knows a new resident with skills as a physician near here," said Mr Woodhouse. The party waited for some fifteen minutes as Anne wept by her mother's side, and Elizabeth and Priscilla did their best to comfort her. Lady Catherine was moved out of the sun onto a chaise under a white canopy a little farther from the water. Mr Woodhouse arranged for his daughter to return to their rented house in the company of Sir Alfred Fletcher and Miss Fletcher.

"I beg your pardon, I do beg your pardon, please let me pass," said a handsome voice. "May I see the lady?" A man pushed through the crowd that had gathered, followed by the mayor, Mr MacArthur. Mr MacArthur's companion was the strangest physician Elizabeth had ever seen. Between forty and forty-five or so years old, with a rather receding hairline, he wore black from head to foot, and was dressed as if he had been in France all of his life. He certainly did not look like any Englishman she had ever seen, though she had detected no accent from his brief speech. His clothes must be very heavy, encrusted with crystals as they were. Elizabeth thought they even looked as though they might be diamonds, though how could a physician be so wealthy? There were even diamond buckles upon his shoes! She had never seen such a sparkly person in all of her life. The man wore rings and jewels on every finger, and was literally tinkling with trinkets.

"Catherine," he said elegantly, as he looked upon her hostess. "How terribly unwell you look, *mon trésor*."

"Do you know my mother?" Anne demanded.

The elegant man turned his eyes to her and uttered, "We've met."

CHAPTER 27



The strange man looked over Lady Catherine, took her hand, and said, “What brought her to this?”

“She had a fright,” Elizabeth rushed to explain. “She collapsed from fear, sir.”

“This is more than fear,” said the man in black. He felt Lady Catherine’s forehead, then felt her pulse in her wrist. “Lady Catherine is being eaten by *un loup*.”

“*The wolf?*” translated Mr Woodhouse. “You mean...”

“Cancer,” The man in black confirmed Mr Woodhouse’s understanding of the mediaeval term for the condition.

“You *will* have a care for my mother’s privacy, sir!” ground out Anne.

“Is it true, Miss de Bourgh?” asked Mr Woodhouse. “Poor Lady Catherine!” Anne gave her mother’s friend no answer.

Elizabeth was shocked. How could this man have known what ailed Lady Catherine without being told, without even a proper examination? “What kind of doctor are you, sir?” she asked.

“Ladies, Mr Woodhouse, allow me to make an introduction. Woodhouse, this is the man I was telling you about. The alchemist. May I present to you all, *The Comte St Germain? Comte*, may I introduce Lady Priscilla Fitzwilliam, The Honourable Miss Anne de Bourgh, Mr Woodhouse, and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“*Charmant*,” said the *comte* in greeting. “Lady Catherine should be moved to her bed as quickly as possible. She is exhausted and ill. She must rest. I will examine her, and do what I can for her there.”

As the men prepared to move Lady Catherine she woke for a few seconds. She looked upon the *comte* and said, “How can it be you?”

“*J’ai promis que nous nous reverrions*,” answered the count in the most beautiful and flawless French Elizabeth had ever heard as he caressed Lady Catherine’s face. Her hostess slipped back into unconsciousness.

Lady Catherine was moved to her rooms at Bourne House, and changed into a dressing gown. She did not wake when the *comte* examined her again under Anne’s supervision.

“She is very ill, *ma petite*,” St Germain told Anne. “She must rest. She needs an elixir. I will go to prepare it. It will not be ready before tomorrow. I will return.”

* * *

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Lady Catherine awoke and followed her usual routine. There was a row in her rooms, where Anne had spent the night in a chair. Anne expected Lady Catherine to remain in bed and rest. Lady Catherine had no intention of resting. She intended to break her fast downstairs with the other ladies. Anne’s harangues followed her down the stairs and into the breakfast room.

When they all took their seats, Elizabeth said to her friend, “Anne, I agree with you that your mother ought to have remained in her bed, but this discord cannot be good for her either.” Anne looked chastened as Elizabeth continued. “*Comte St Germain* is to return today with the elixir he promised. I am certain he will give Lady Catherine an examination, and she will be prepared to hear his advice. Eating breakfast with us is not likely to do her in, my friend. We shall moderate our enthusiasm.”

There was a clatter as Lady Catherine dropped her fork into her dish of kedgeree. “I thought that I’d dreamt him.”

“So you *do* know him then,” said Anne curiously.

“I feel that my thoughts are disordered,” whispered Lady Catherine, putting a hand to her temple. “It could not have been him. Not as he was. It must be his son. What an uncanny resemblance. Or perhaps he *is* older, but I saw him as he is in my memory. Perhaps it was delirium? How old was he?”

“I should say no older than fifty,” answered Priscilla, spreading jam on her muffin.

“I would have said younger, even. An exceedingly well-preserved forty-five, perhaps?” added Elizabeth.

“It must be his son, then,” mused Lady Catherine. “The *comte* was near to that age when I knew him.”

“You still have not told us *how* you knew him,” retorted Anne. “Who is he?”

“It has been two and thirty years at least,” said Lady Catherine. “I met him the year I came out. I was seventeen. He was a mysterious man who was arrested in London early in the year 1780. England was at war with everyone. America, Spain, France, the Dutch. Tensions were mounting, and foreigners were rarely trusted. He spoke perfect English, but he was unmistakably foreign. He was thought to be a spy. It was not the first time he had been arrested in England, yet the authorities insisted that he had not aged a day since they had arrested him twenty years previous. Two of his interrogators from his previous imprisonment were still alive, and they were shocked by how well preserved he was, but there was no doubt that it was the same man. They held him for some months, but when they could not specify what crime he had committed, and what sort of spy he was, they let him go. My father said it was to watch him and see what he did, if he would incriminate himself somehow.

“Instead, he became quite friendly with the nobility, and spent some months among them in London. He said that he had come to London with a cure for King George. He insisted that his condition could be cured with an elixir he had made, and that if the King’s condition could be improved, that the King would not be so easily led into war. He said that war

must cease on the continent, or that in nine years time, there would be an even greater war, one which would destroy France, and throw all of the continent into conflict for more than sixteen years. He insisted that if we were to cure King George, that his advisors could not lead the man astray, and that he would make sound decisions that would bring England back to peace. His prediction proved true, as you can see. France is devastated, and the continent is still destroying itself.”

Lady Catherine sighed. “He never got close to the King, to my knowledge. The King’s mother and advisors controlled everything that he saw and heard, or so the *comte* said. He spent some time socialising among the nobility in London before several attempts were made on his life, and he disappeared.”

“He spoke to you as if unto a lover,” said Anne, struggling to cast her mother in such a light. “In French.”

“As you know, I never learned the language properly, but he always spoke to me thus. I suppose you could say he courted me, though I am certain that I knew even at the tender age of seventeen that it was never in earnest. I will not deny that I enjoyed his attentions. It was a disappointment when he disappeared, but my father had already warned me that there were no particular connections to make such an alliance desirable, and that it would never proceed. My father wished me to make a match that would satisfy his political ambitions. The man *claimed* to be a *comte*, but in all truth, no one knew *who* he was, and the French were rarely trusted. I knew my father, and he meant what he said. There was little point in allowing myself to be swept away, no matter the *comte*’s perceived regard. But it is of little importance. The man I knew must be near to eighty or more now. This must be his son.”

“He said that you’d met,” insisted Anne.

“If he is only near to fifty, that would be impossible,” insisted her mother irritably. “As I just told you, Anne, he was near to fifty when I met him more than three decades ago.”

After breakfast, the ladies moved to the drawing room. Anne objected, but Lady Catherine insisted that she was well enough, and the entire party of ladies mutually agreed that no one would venture out today. They would all wait for the *comte* to arrive, and they would be at Lady Catherine's disposal, and distract her from wasting her strength. Lydia repaired immediately to the harp, and played a light, peaceful tune that she had mastered easily. They had not been in the drawing room above a half hour when callers started arriving in droves. First, the Fletchers visited, then the Misses Jenkins. Lady Amesbury called, and with her was her eldest son, the heir to his father's title. The purpose of the visit was to inquire after the health of Lady Catherine, and to hand deliver an invitation to a private ball at their nearby estate, but it soon became obvious that her son, the Viscount Bexley, was present to pay court to Anne.

"As if I should let her marry into such a family," said Lady Catherine quietly to Elizabeth as the mother and son were shown out. "That family has been known to be in trouble for more than a decade due to the wildness of their sons. His lordship would not hear of any of them taking employment, not even as clergymen. He believes them too far above that. The young men are expected to marry well, well enough that a portion of their wife's dowry will go to support the earldom. Two of his sons have cut ties since he sold them into marriage, and kept most of their wives' wealth for the title. The eldest will only marry a mighty fortune. It does not surprise me that our presence brought him running home. There are not many heiresses to compete with Anne. I will be grateful when Darcy arrives, and I can worry less about these rakes."

"Who is a rake?" asked Georgiana, a moment later when the last caller had departed.

"That abominable viscount is a rake, Georgie, and you must learn to identify these men, and show them the door when they come calling," answered Priscilla, tossing her head.

"What about that one that is so interested in you? Lord Lennox? And that other one who is interested in Anne, what was his name?"

“Sir Albert Swinton,” Lydia piped up from the harp.

“Yes, that one. I thought he was rather charming,” giggled Georgiana.

“Rakes! Every last one,” declared Priscilla. “Georgie, I want no truck with rakes. A rake is a gentleman that will receive no notice from me. Did you not see them two days ago when we were coming out of the confectioners? Lord Lennox, hanging out the side of his friend’s barouche? Calling upon my notice in such a way? No thank you, I keep my ear to the ground, and I happen to know that Eastbourne is positively crawling with rakes who are all terribly out of pocket. It is astonishing how many impoverished fortune hunters there are here, not a single worthy gentleman in the bunch!”

“You learn from your cousin, Georgiana, she will not lead you astray,” advised Lady Catherine.

“Goodness! I am grateful that William will not force me out until I am ready. He has promised me, you see. I have so many fears! The most terrifying thought is my own lack of discernment. How am I to tell the difference between a rogue and a proper gentleman, when bad men are often so charming? And the stories I have heard from Priscilla, about the cruelty amongst the young ladies, well, I should not like to go amongst so many unpleasant people just yet. And the leaders of society! What if they should not like me? I could not bear to be disgraced as Lady Rebecca Stanley was last year by Lady Jersey!”

“Priscilla, it was not kind of you to frighten your cousin, it is not all so bad,” Lady Catherine chided her other niece.

“I would rather know, Aunt, what I am to face, *before* I must endure it, else how shall I ever be prepared?” worried Georgiana.

“Your mother was revered, was she not? I am certain your brother told me that she was,” Elizabeth said. “The beloved Lady Anne, as was? That by itself must add to your anxiety, living up to be worthy of her.”

“Yes!” cried Georgiana, nodding vigorously.

“What you do not realise, Georgiana, is that this works to your *advantage*. Everyone loved your mother, and they miss her, so they *wish* to approve of you. I am told that your mother was very kind and gentle, and I see the same qualities in you. Just be yourself, Georgie, and as long as you do not do anything truly wicked, or cruel, everyone will adore you simply because they wish to do so,” Elizabeth advised. “Later, when they have come to know you for the lovely person that you are, they will learn to appreciate you for your own merits.”

“I could not have said it better myself.” Lady Catherine nodded approvingly. “Miss Bennet, that was remarkably well considered. Georgiana, Miss Bennet is entirely correct. My sister was beloved by all who knew her, and though you are unsure of yourself, because you did not know her, you carry her grace and gentleness. You do not need to fear that you will not do her proud, because you carry her elegance and beauty in your very essence. They will love you simply because they wish to love you, niece.”

“If anything, it is an advantage that none of the other debutantes have, their mother’s reputation for goodness ensuring their success in such a manner,” quipped Priscilla.

“I am not certain that I would call entering society without the support of my mother an advantage,” snapped Georgiana. She then looked chastened. “Oh dear, Priscilla, I should not have spoken that way.”

“Yes, of course you should. That was terribly unfeeling of me, Georgie. I did not mean it how it sounded. I should never wish to hurt you in such a manner. Do forgive me, cousin,” Priscilla begged.

“Of course,” Georgiana said.

“That does, however, only prove that when the time comes to deal with the cruelty of the other young women, you will not be out of your depth,” pointed out Elizabeth. “You might have been sharp, but sometimes that is called for, in order to put another in their place. You do not wish to be so often, no one wants a reputation for being shrewish, but you *are* the

daughter of Lady Anne, you must not allow anyone to cow you, and you rose to that occasion rather well.”

“I cannot but agree,” said Lady Catherine as the next group of callers was announced.

Mrs Mason and her two daughters spent a quarter hour with them, then Sir Albert Swinton, who was determinedly in pursuit of Anne’s notice, and was failing miserably to attain it. Anne spent his visit ignoring him in a most determined manner, taking Lydia’s place by the harp. Her skills were rudimentary, after only a fortnight of indifferent instruction, but she would rather embarrass herself than tolerate Sir Albert’s attentions.

Mr and Miss Woodhouse were announced next. Miss Woodhouse rarely paid calls, due to the nature of her illness. She had fallen ill with influenza the year previous, and had since been victim to weakness, fatigue, and fainting spells since then. Elizabeth thought it was an odd sort of condition, for occasionally Miss Woodhouse seemed quite well, then she would suddenly swoon without warning, and either take to her bed, or spend the rest of the day swaddled in blankets in a comfortable chair, looking weak. Elizabeth had never observed such an illness before.

“My dear lady! Whatever are you doing out of bed!” exclaimed Mr Woodhouse as he took Lady Catherine’s hand and kissed it. Elizabeth had often wondered since arriving in the little town whether Mr Woodhouse might not have quickly developed a particular fondness for Lady Catherine. Her hostess had softened a great deal since entering Hertfordshire the previous December, but it was difficult for Elizabeth to tell if the lady saw the gentleman’s interest, or whether it was welcomed. The two got along very well, although his daughter did not appreciate Lady Catherine’s particular attention, nor her interest in Miss Woodhouse’s illness and recovery.

“Nonsense, I am perfectly well,” said Lady Catherine dismissively.

“Tell me it is not true, what the man said about your condition,” Mr Woodhouse begged.

“I shall neither confirm nor deny anything of the sort, and I will thank you for my privacy,” answered Lady Catherine firmly. “Whatever he said, he ought not have done so in company.”

“I am still shocked at how he made such an assertion at only a glance,” said Elizabeth. “He seems to be an odd sort of physician.”

“The man is an alchemist.” replied Mr Woodhouse. “Such men practise what is called universal medicine; they are scientists, and they often have knowledge that other doctors do not. Most doctors who practise alchemy do not admit it openly. Not much is known about their methods other than that they sometimes use an elixir and special stones to treat illness, and no one knows how it works. It was my hope to obtain an appointment with the man for my Emma; Mr MacArthur had promised me and Fletcher an introduction.”

“As if a mere tonic could cure cancer,” said Anne scathingly. “It sounds like quackery to me.”

“Anne,” her mother interrupted in warning. She did not wish for her condition to be discussed in such a manner.

Lady Catherine had brought her butler with her for the duration of their visit to Eastbourne. Torrens entered the room, and announced. “The *Comte St Germain*.”

Everyone rose as the man entered and bowed elegantly. He was dressed much as he had been the day before. “Madame, what do you do out of bed? You should be resting,” St Germain said as he approached Lady Catherine and kissed her hand.

“I feel quite well, thank you,” Lady Catherine said, inspecting his countenance with a look of shock. “It cannot be you,” she said. “I believe I met your father, sir, some three decades ago in London.”

“Oh no, dear Catherine, it was indeed I who courted you all of those years ago,” he assured her.

“But then you must be nearly eighty years old! You have not aged a day! Indeed, I believe you may actually look even

younger than you did in 1780!”

Comte St Germain smiled. “This is not impossible.”

“But how?” blurted out Anne.

“I am an alchemist,” the man shrugged, as if this explained everything.

“Then prove it,” challenged Anne. when the *comte* raised a brow, she continued. “Prove it by telling my mother something that only the two of you might know.”

The *comte* smiled again, and whispered something into Lady Catherine’s ear. Their hostess blushed in mortification, and replied, “You *would* bring up such a memory, you rogue!” Elizabeth noted that Mr Woodhouse seemed dismayed by this exchange.

“How have you come to visit Eastbourne?” Georgiana piped up timidly.

“I am here because of your country’s witless stupidity,” answered the *comte*, but gently.

“What is that supposed to mean?” said Anne.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” replied the *comte*, who would say no more on the subject. “Lady Catherine, I have made an elixir for you. If you have a private room and a maid, I shall examine you again, and administer it.”

“I shall accompany you,” said Anne, rising quickly.

“No, thank you, Anne. I shall meet with the *comte* for my examination with my maid,” corrected Lady Catherine.

“But-” began Anne in protest.

“I said *no thank you*, Anne, do allow me the dignity of my privacy,” her mother said firmly. “I am a dowager, and the *comte* is a physician, I do not require a chaperone other than my own maid.”

Mr Woodhouse had said nothing since the *comte* had entered, but he stood and asked, “*Monsieur le comte*, before I leave, could I impose upon you to make an appointment to examine my daughter while you visit Eastbourne?”

St Germain glanced over at Emma Woodhouse, “She’s fine,” he said dismissively.

“She is most sincerely ill, sir!” objected Mr Woodhouse, as Miss Woodhouse turned beet red.

“She most certainly is not,” replied St Germain, turning to follow Lady Catherine out of the drawing room.

CHAPTER 28



Two days later, a carriage pulled up to Bourne House, carrying a number of unexpected guests.

“Whatever do you do here, Bennet?” asked Lady Catherine as her old rector, now Mr William Bennet, dismounted from Bartholomew, and assisted Mary, Jane, and Caroline Bingley out of Mr Bingley’s carriage.

Mr Bingley dismounted from his horse as well, and greeted Lady Catherine and Anne pleasantly. “Lady Catherine, I thought I might throw myself upon your hospitality this time!”

“My dear Lady Catherine, when we had word from my cousin Elizabeth about your turn, we thought we ought to come and see what we could do to aid your comfort,” answered William. “I do not flatter myself that my counsel is needed, but if there was anything we might do to assist you or Miss de Bourgh, we felt that we must come to you with all haste.”

“That, and my mother has made life impossible at Longbourn,” added Mary. She looked at Elizabeth. “Mama wants a double wedding in the worst way, Lizzy. She has made life quite uncomfortable for Jane and poor Mr Bingley, in her determination to see them engaged.”

“Mr Bingley and I shall become engaged exactly when and if we are ready to do so, and not a moment before,” said Jane, bussing Elizabeth’s cheeks, and sweeping Lydia into a warm

embrace. “And Mary and our cousin deserve their own wedding; I will not overshadow it.”

“William and I quite agree that such a scheme could only enhance our joy, and that of all of our family and friends, but I will not rush you,” said Mary to her sister, in what was obviously a conversation the two had held before.

“Well we are very glad to have you, and Bennet, perhaps the company of you and Bingley will not be amiss; you are most welcome,” said Lady Catherine, approvingly. “Eastbourne is swimming in rakes and rogues, it will be good to have men I can trust about the house. I shall be grateful indeed when we finally have my nephew’s protection. Miss Bingley, you must tell me all about your time in town. I was hoping for a letter from you, but this is better.”

“It is good to see your ladyship looking so well, Miss Elizabeth’s letter gave us quite a turn.” Miss Bingley curtsied deeply before the woman who had spent months drilling etiquette into her, changing her address greatly.

Her ladyship got her wish some three days later. Mr Darcy had left Pemberley the very day after receiving Elizabeth and Georgiana’s express packet, and stopped only briefly in London. Elizabeth was thrilled to be back in his company after so many months, but, like Jane, she felt that the separation had been good for them. She had learned to miss him, and to long for him, and that to be without him caused her despair. The two had expressed their devotion to one another in no uncertain terms in their correspondence, and now that he was here, Elizabeth felt rather shy in his presence, blushing at the memory of all of the expressions of *amour* the two had shared on paper. Darcy as well felt reticent in her presence, though the two of them soon found their previous camaraderie the following morning when Darcy accompanied her for a walk.

To their surprise, they found not only Lydia, but Anne waiting for them when they descended the stairs for their morning exercise. “I beg your pardon, Lizzy, for imposing upon your time with my cousin, but I simply must have a few words with him before my mother comes down this morning,” Anne said apologetically. Elizabeth made no objection, and

Darcy asked Anne to tell him what was on her mind as they walked.

“It is that abominable foreigner, that is the problem!” Anne cried. Anne loathed the *Comte St Germain*. After having tried his elixir, Lady Catherine was robust with energy and vitality. Her colour was back, and she was eating with appetite. Anne did not trust it. “How can a mere tonic cure a cancer of the breast, Darcy? I am convinced that this elixir only makes her think she is better. She has the appointment with the other surgeon in a few days, I fear that this *comte’s* quack medicine will make her even more unwilling to consider Mr Stewart’s cure.” There had been even more fighting when Lady Catherine had wished for the *comte* to examine Anne, who outright refused to allow him near her, claiming that she had endured enough of the quack medicine her mother believed in already.

Elizabeth had been overjoyed by Lady Catherine’s return to vigour, but she could understand Anne’s concern.

“I comprehend your worries entirely, cousin,” Darcy replied. “And I assure you that I share them equally. Someone must question this *comte* about his methods. If he claims they are to work, he must explain *how* they work, if he wishes for my aunt’s family to trust him with her health. I assure you that I will do so, directly.”

* * *

FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, Lady Catherine was indefatigable. She did attend the meeting with the surgeons, but so far refused to agree on a date for a procedure. She felt well enough, and she was not ready for such a step. Anne did her very best to discover whether she would at some point agree, but Lady Catherine was closed-mouthed on the subject. She would not discuss the *Comte’s* methods or treatments with anyone. She met with him twice per week, when he presumably administered an elixir of unknown origin.

Darcy had done his best to speak with the man, but the man came and went mysteriously, talked in circles, and avoided a private discussion of any importance. Eventually

Lady Catherine instructed Darcy to cease his attempts to interrogate the man, and informed him in no uncertain terms that her treatments were not his business. This led to a terrible row with Anne, which raged for three days. Elizabeth did everything in her power to induce her friend to remain calm, for this abominable fighting could not be good for Lady Catherine's health, but Anne was determined to carry her point. Lady Catherine was equally determined to be obstinate.

The *comte* had examined Miss Amanda Fletcher, and his elixir was administered. That young lady had suffered weakness of the heart after scarlet fever, but the *comte* insisted that she might make a partial recovery if her father stopped allowing her to be bled. As with Lady Catherine, the elixir had a miraculous effect. Miss Fletcher was soon full of vigour, and was dancing in the assembly rooms each week by night. The *comte* warned her father that the elixir alone would not have a permanent effect, and that she must diligently build her strength for the improvement to be permanent.

Mr Woodhouse was outraged that the *comte* refused to examine Miss Woodhouse. "All that one needs is a good spanking," the foreigner insisted. Mr Woodhouse was indignant, and begged Lady Catherine to intervene on Miss Woodhouse's behalf, but Lady Catherine could do nothing. Miss Woodhouse maintained that she found the *comte's* dismissive manner of her frightening, and that she did not wish to be examined by him. Elizabeth found the entire situation entirely perplexing. Miss Woodhouse's father dragged her to Bourne House each day and to every evening event at which the *comte* was to attend, in order to place the girl in his path. Elizabeth seemed to be the only one to notice that Miss Woodhouse had not had a spell in some time, and that her main interest seemed to be the pairing of Priscilla and Mr Darcy.

Darcy was annoyed by Miss Woodhouse. She spoke endlessly in his presence of Priscilla's virtues, and the importance of family dynasties and lineage. One might have thought the young lady was a protege of Lady Catherine's, so inexhaustible she was upon the subject. Priscilla thought the entire matter was a farce, and amused herself endlessly in Miss

Woodhouse's presence by allowing the girl to make a spectacle of herself in her attempts to throw Mr Darcy together with his cousin.

Miss Bingley was surprisingly a friend to Darcy and Elizabeth during this time. Lady Catherine had impressed upon her that it would be to her advantage if Darcy wed Elizabeth and Charles wed Jane. She was keen to see these connections created. She wished very much to be the sister of Mrs Darcy's sister, and welcome at Pemberley and Darcy House, if she was not to be Mrs Darcy herself. She inserted herself into all of their affairs whenever Miss Woodhouse attempted to manage Darcy and Elizabeth, and constantly placed herself in Miss Woodhouse's path, which was amusing to everyone, for Miss Woodhouse was a snob, and being imposed upon daily by a tradesman's daughter was excessively distressing for her.

The *comte* was the darling of every event, and the favourite of everyone with the exception of Anne and the Woodhouses. He was an incredible conversationalist, and after some days, even Darcy quite forgot he was meant to be interrogating the man about his medicinal methods, and instead spent hours in discussion about historical events, of which the *comte* had incredible knowledge, and claimed to have seen first hand. Elizabeth noticed that he drank mineral water, but never ate food nor drank wine, not a morsel. She wondered if the man might be a vampire.

"You do realise that if he has seen everything he claims, that he must be nearly two thousand years old," said Anne, rolling her eyes, as she approached Elizabeth and Darcy at the confectioners one afternoon when they were debating in a lively manner about one of the *comte's* more incredible claims about the court of Catherine the Great.

"According to the *comte*, *this is not impossible*," answered Elizabeth, eyes twinkling.

"He does admit that he is very old," observed Darcy, smiling at Elizabeth in amusement.

“He ought to admit that he is a great conniver!” snapped Anne in irritation, followed by a lively quarter hour debate between the two cousins regarding the credibility of the *comte*’s claims.

“Did you come out alone, Cousin?” asked Darcy finally. “You usually drive out with one of the other ladies.”

“Did not Lydia come in right behind me?” Anne looked about the shop. “Elizabeth, keeping your youngest sister contained is like nailing jam to a tree.”

CHAPTER 29



*M*adrid - 1660

IN A DIMLY LIT room in Madrid came the hushed voices of three men. The men argued, talking over one another in Spanish, watching as a nobleman lay dying of a mortal wound sustained in a duel. Duelling was not yet outlawed, and sometimes there were so many in one night that the streets of Madrid might be littered with corpses by the dawn.

The door opened, and a physician, garbed from head to toe in black, with rings on every finger, and an enormous red stone hanging from his neck entered with his servant and the men sent to fetch him. Whispers made their way through the room, and only two words were understood from the rest. *San German*.

The men watched doubtfully as the healer and his servant began to treat the dying nobleman with rare herbs and strange techniques, blending science with mysticism. When they completed their work, the nobleman's pallor had returned to normal, and his wound had been expertly bandaged. Still, the other men in the room doubted that he would last the night. The physician had given a good show of competence, then disappeared with his fee, but the men were all certain that the nobleman would be dead by morning.

Several hours later, the men returned to find their friend sitting up in his bed, drinking wine and partaking heartily of his breakfast, his bandage discarded, and the wound which it

had covered completely healed, without even the trace of a scar.

* * *

A WEEK LATER, the man known in Madrid as *San German* looked out his window as the inquisitors invaded the neighbourhood. Two score men converged upon his home, ready to arrest, torture, interrogate, and kill him for having used medical science to heal the wounded nobleman. It had been too much to expect the nobleman and his friends to remain silent about the wonder they had witnessed.

Shouts were heard as the men pounded up the stairs. The door burst open to reveal a completely empty room. The man known as *San German* had disappeared entirely.

CHAPTER 30



Lydia Bennet had not intended to separate from her companion when they arrived at the confectioners. But as they entered, a display in the milliners window across the street distracted her. It was an enormous bonnet... With a stuffed *bird* on it! It was nearly the most ridiculous thing she had ever seen. Lydia was drawn to the shop window, wishing that she could draw so that she might sketch the hat for Kitty and Mama's amusement. There was also a *turban* in the window, in a lovely sea foam green silk. Mama had always wished for a turban, though the milliner in Meryton never sold such things. Lydia could see the turban on her mother, perhaps at Mary's wedding, and simply had to inquire about it.

"May I ask the price of that turban?" Lydia asked as she entered the shop.

"Bit mature for you, don't you think, miss?" The milliner said smartly in reply.

"Oh, not for me! My mother has always wished for one, and my sister is getting married in August. I thought it might make a superior gift," Lydia explained.

"Well! In that case, you should know that Mr Johnson has the matching silk at the haberdashery, a dress length for one and six. The turban is four pounds, miss," answered the woman.

Lydia wondered how she could afford such a gift as she looked about the shop. "Your wares are lovely," she marvelled. "What a delightfully colourful shop."

“Thank you, my dear,” the woman replied with a smile, as she arranged an attractive display of colourful norman bonnets. There was a lovely bridal bonnet that would be perfect for Mary. *How on earth am I to afford all of this?* she thought as she asked for the price of the wedding bonnet.

“That one is two and seven,” the milliner informed her.

“My sister is safeguarding my funds, but I shall return, directly!” Lydia promised as she left the shop, and the milliner bid her good day. Lydia was just about to head across the street when she saw a familiar face duck into a nearby alley. She followed to the edge of the alley and peered around. It *was* Mr Wickham! He turned in another direction, and Lydia pursued him halfway up the market street, ducking in and out of alleys and behind buildings and shops. Finally Mr Wickham stopped in a secluded area, and began to talk to another gentleman.

Who was he again? Lord Buxton? Bixby? Bexley? Yes. Bexley. thought Lydia as she watched the two men speak. Wickham passed the man a heavy purse. *Where would Mr Wickham get money?* Lydia wondered. Her eyes had been opened to the man’s true character by Georgiana, who was still ashamed of herself for her stupidity. Yet here he was, handing Viscount Bexley an enormous purse.

Lydia smothered a squeak as someone touched her elbow. The *Comte* St Germain pulled her away from the alley. “*Ma petite*, you should not follow such disreputable men. Indeed, you should not follow *any* men.”

Lydia looked abashed as the *comte* regarded her sternly. “I should not have. I know that man in the uniform, and I was curious to know what he is doing here.”

“I know who he is,” the *comte* replied, giving nothing else away. “He is dangerous. You must remain with your sisters at all times, *ma petite*.”

“I am certain Lizzy shall send me home after I have been caught following an officer,” Lydia said miserably.

“I shall say nothing. You were in the milliner’s shop. That is all,” the *comte* promised.

“Why would you do that?” Lydia asked curiously, wondering why the man had followed her so far.

The *comte* hesitated, then seemed to decide upon honesty rather than elusive speech for once. “I was terribly unkind to someone once, and I have suffered the consequences ever since,” confessed the man with a strange look in his eye. “The most important lesson I have learnt in my time here is that one ought never be unkind to those who do not deserve it.”

“What about those who do deserve it?” said Lydia with interest as they made their way through the market town, back to the confectioner’s shop.

The *comte*’s eyes turned hard. “You save all of your rage and malice for those who do, *ma petite*.”

“Who was it?” Lydia asked. “The one you were unkind to.”

The *comte* paused in front of the door to the confectionery. “You would not believe me if I told you. Suffice it to say that he was the most forgiving man who ever lived. He forgave all but me.”

Suddenly, the door burst open and Anne and Elizabeth emerged from the shop. “Lydia Bennet, where have you been! Papa specifically said no wandering or sneaking off!”

“I am sorry, Lizzy, but look at the lovely turban in the milliner’s window! Does it not make you think of Mama? I am wild to buy it for her, but it is so expensive!”

Elizabeth followed Lydia ruefully across the street. Of course, if Lydia disappeared, it *would* be because of either a hat, or a man. She was only grateful that it had not been a man. Darcy came out of the confectioners and followed, having stayed a moment behind to pay their bill. Lydia glanced around to realise that the *comte* had disappeared.

The small group stood on the pavement in front of the shop and viewed the turban. “Lydia, I must hand it to you, that turban is indeed perfect for Mama. But *four pounds*?”

“And do not forget, the haberdasher has the dress silk for one and six! Lizzy, you simply must help me discover how I

shall pay for it. And the wedding bonnet for Mary for two and seven! In fact, the woman has the most delightful display of colourful caps, I can just see us all the day of the wedding, she has one that is perfect for each of us!” Lydia insisted.

“You have spent little of your pin money, Lydia, you have nearly enough, but they are *so dear!* Are you certain you wish to spend all of your funds at once on bonnets?” said Elizabeth, sceptically. She then laughed inwardly at her own thoughts. *Of course* Lydia wished to spend all her funds on bonnets. “Although, Mary has her own funds, and would probably prefer to pick out her own wedding bonnet. She could purchase her own. But if you purchase Mama’s and the silk, it would leave you with less than a pound for the rest of our time here.”

“I have an idea. Why do you not return to Bourne House for now?” suggested Darcy. “Speak with your sisters tonight. Perhaps tomorrow they might like to accompany you to the shop, and maybe you can all share the cost of a gift to your mother, if they like it.”

“I would not mind contributing if Jane does,” agreed Elizabeth. “And Papa gave each of us generous funds to have a dress made before the wedding. Now is as good a time as any to decide what we shall wear, and I have seen the yard goods at Mr Johnson’s. They are the equal of anything in our uncle’s warehouses.”

The ladies returned to Bourne House, where Mary and Jane quickly agreed to the outing. The following morning, the Bennet sisters sailed into the milliner’s in high spirits, ready for a morning of shopping, and possibly even selecting gowns, if they found fabrics and fashion plates they liked. The milliner’s jaw dropped as they entered. “How many sisters do you have?” she asked Lydia.

“Four, but one is sadly missing today,” Lydia answered happily. The four sisters quickly agreed that the turban was perfect for Mrs Bennet. The others tried not to allow Mary to contribute to it, since it *was* for her wedding, but Mary insisted, and so they each contributed a pound. Mary adored the sempstress bonnet in white satin, and purchased it with the

funds her father had gifted her for the purpose. Jane and Elizabeth exclaimed over the norman bonnets, Jane favoured one in Maria Luisa blue, with straw coloured French trimming, while Elizabeth was quite in raptures over the rose satin, ornamented with alternate quiltings of white crepe and rose ribband, and perfected with a small bunch of ranunculus.

All three sisters agreed that the norman bonnet in amber satin with pleated ribband in the same colour, with a small plume of ostrich feathers was perfect for Kitty, and the sisters each chipped in to buy it for her. Lydia selected the norman bonnet in parma violet for herself, trimmed with a scarf of the same colour, with a full rosette. The milliner assured them that Mr Johnson had the matching fabrics for each of the bonnets in question. When the Bennet sisters left her shop, Miss Gilbert put the closed sign on the door, and went directly to the butcher, to order something nice to treat her mother. It was not every day that one sold nearly half of the contents of one's shop at once. And the turban! Miss Gilbert had given into inspiration when she saw the sea foam green silk, but she had expected the item to grace her shop window for some time, given its price. There was a lovely periwinkle blue silk at Johnson's, and Miss Gilbert was keen to try her luck with another turban.

The Bennet sisters proceeded to the haberdashery, where, as promised, they found the silks and satins to match their bonnets. They each bought a dress length, for Kitty and Mrs Bennet as well, and took the gifts to the post office, to be sent express to Meryton, so that Mrs Bennet and Kitty could have the gowns started by the dressmaker there. The young ladies then proceeded to the tea house. Jane treated them all to tea, sandwiches, and cakes, and they all made merry as they looked over a book of fashion plates that Lydia had just purchased from Johnson's.

Miss Pearl and Miss Ruby at The Modest Modiste were delighted to see the Miss Bennets arrive with the intention of creating gowns for their sister's wedding. Mary had found a dress length of shimmering white satin at Johnson's, and intended for the trim on the gown to be red. Lydia promised to help her trim her new bonnet with the same colour.

* * *

DARCY AND GEORGIANA went for a ride that morning, then to the village to take tea at the confectioner's. Georgiana waited upon her horse as Darcy went into the crowded establishment to speak for a table before they took their horses to the livery. From atop her horse, she surveyed the little market street. From the corner of her eye, a small wave caught her attention. She glanced over, then did a double take to see Richard at the corner. Her cousin was in his regimentals; he tipped his hat and grinned at her, then vanished.

"The wait is only twenty minutes, would you care to stroll a bit while we wait, Sister?" said Darcy as he returned and helped her down from her horse.

"Brother, I just saw Richard," Georgiana told her brother.

"Richard? Where?" Darcy looked about. "Richard could not be here, Georgie, he is on a special assignment from the war office."

"I know, William, but I am certain it was he," insisted Georgiana. "He tipped his hat to me."

"It was probably some soldier being impudent, Sister; you forget how lovely you are." Darcy smiled. "Come, let us stroll a bit."

Georgiana was slightly irked at being told what she saw like a silly little woman by someone who had not even been present, but she was not in the habit of being disrespectful to her brother, so she bit her tongue.

CHAPTER 31



The following day was the weekly dance assembly. The ladies had been waiting with excitement for Darcy to arrive so that Lady Catherine would agree to attend. There were people of all types, and one might find oneself standing up with a shopkeeper as easily as a nobleman, but there were enough dance partners to satisfy the ladies. After some wheedling from Lydia, Elizabeth was surprised to find herself encouraging Darcy and Lady Catherine to allow the younger girls to accompany them, on the condition that they only dance with each other and the gentlemen of the house, and would leave immediately after those dances with Mrs Annesley. Georgiana and Lydia were content with this, and made no trouble. The ladies dined in their rooms as they prepared for the dance, and Elizabeth and Jane took particular care with their toilette, for they had not danced with their young men since visiting London after the festive season.

Elizabeth was surprised to see Mr and Miss Woodhouse as they entered the assembly. "I shall not dance," the young woman insisted. "I do not think it a good idea, I must preserve my strength. But I simply had to come, and see my friend Lady Priscilla stand up with her cousin Mr Darcy for the first."

"You shall be sorely disappointed, for we are both committed elsewhere," laughed Priscilla, taking the arm of Lord Lennox, who had solicited the first two dances some days ago. He was a rake, and she would not encourage him, but Priscilla saw no harm in dancing and enjoying the evening. Anne too, took the arm of Sir Albert Swinton, and Georgiana and Lydia took to the floor together, laughing in delight.

“It really is too much that Miss Elizabeth stands in the way of what is best for her friend,” said Miss Woodhouse, as Elizabeth took the floor with Darcy.

“It really is too much that you cannot mind your own business,” sneered Lady Catherine, who was thoroughly tired of Miss Woodhouse’s endless remarks in that direction. The older woman moved to the side of the room with the Misses Jenkins, who had saved her a seat with the matrons.

“Well, really!” said Miss Woodhouse.

“You rather asked for that,” smirked Caroline Bingley.

“I beg your pardon!” exclaimed Miss Woodhouse.

“She is not wrong, my dear. Lady Catherine has made her approval of her nephew’s courtship plain,” said her father.

“But, Papa!” Miss Woodhouse objected.

“Come now, Miss Woodhouse, you must not tire yourself. Come and sit here by the wall with me, you may keep me company while I await an invitation to dance.” Caroline took Emma’s arm and led her to the side of the room with the other young ladies.

“Excuse me, but I am no wallflower!” objected Miss Woodhouse again.

“Well, you are an invalid, are you not? You ought to get used to sitting by the wall if you are to remain forever unwell,” said Caroline pointedly. All of the young ladies agreed that no one believed Miss Woodhouse was truly unwell. It was not only that the *comte* had drawn it to attention, everyone had noticed that Miss Woodhouse’s condition was odd, and that no one seemed to believe in it but her father.

It was not long before Caroline was asked to dance by the colonel of the militia, a dashing man, with an expectation of a rather incredible estate from an uncle on his mother’s side one day. It was rumoured that the family’s fortune rivalled Mr Darcy’s, though the uncle himself was reclusive and reviled society. In the meantime, Colonel George Allen was doing his duty to his country. Caroline never thought she might consider an officer, but a handsome colonel with fine expectations, who

would not go to war, for his regiment did not leave the country? Perhaps...

By the third set, the *comte* had arrived, and solicited a dance with all of the noble ladies present, as well as the ladies of Bourne House. Everyone was shocked and delighted to see Lady Catherine spinning about the floor with the *comte*, laughing, eyes alive with merriment. Mr Woodhouse lost no time in claiming her hand for the next set, and when she returned to the side of the room, Darcy approached her with his hand outstretched.

“Aunt, you could not be so cruel as to deny your favourite nephew the pleasure,” grinned Darcy. His aunt took his arm as the *comte* approached Elizabeth for their set.

“Your elixir has done wonders for her,” Elizabeth commented, following the *comte*’s gaze to her hostess.

“She has always reminded me of Catherine the Great. How that woman loved to dance! So alive! So strong, so determined...” he trailed off as his memories washed over him. “Did you know, her real name was not Catherine?” he laughed aloud, “It was Sophie.”

“How do you know all of this?” Elizabeth asked curiously. This man was *such a conundrum!* In a hundred years, she could never puzzle him out.

The *comte* smiled at her and replied, “I was there.”

“How could that be possible?” Elizabeth demanded.

“*Mademoiselle*, I have attended so many coronations and royal funerals, I regard myself as a proficient bystander of history,” answered the mysterious man.

“Are you a vampire, then?” she asked boldly.

“I have been mistaken for a vampire, a time traveller, and a wizard. Truthfully, I am only a man who has discovered a wonderful skin cream.” he smiled.

“How old are you then?” Elizabeth asked.

“The *comte* laughed at her boldness. “*Mademoiselle*, I have lived through so many centuries, that I stopped counting

birthdays many, many years ago.”

They stopped talking as the dance drew them apart for a moment, and he smiled at her. “You are a citrine, I think. Perhaps a topaz.”

“Whatever do you mean, *monsieur*?” Elizabeth asked.

The *comte* laughed. “I like to amuse myself, by selecting the perfect jewel for the ladies of my acquaintance. You, *mademoiselle*, are a citrine. Your youngest sister, she is a rare one. You do not see many pink topaz. Her friend, *Mademoiselle D’Arcy*, that one is special. Not a jewel, but a pearl.”

“What an amusing activity,” Elizabeth laughed. “I must say, you do have good taste, and good instincts too, I think.”

“In a jewel, I see the splendour of creation, and the imperfections that nature left. Just as the finest jewels have tiny flaws, so too do the most noble hearts.” He nodded towards Emma Woodhouse who was near the side of the floor, watching her father and Lady Catherine intently, “Like your friend there.”

“I am not at all certain what you mean, but Miss Woodhouse’s condition is curious, is it not?” Elizabeth said in perplexity.

“Not so very curious,” the *comte* said, smiling. “I believe it makes perfect sense.”

* * *

“THE *COMTE* IS CERTAINLY AN ODD MAN,” Elizabeth said as she joined Jane, Bingley, and Darcy at the side of the room a short time later. “Every time we speak, I leave the conversation lightheaded.”

“Ha! Yesterday, the man informed me what Louis XVI was wearing at his beheading!” Bingley choked out. “And what’s even more odd, I believe he was perfectly serious!”

“And your aunt’s claim that he has not aged since she met him over thirty years ago!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “He just informed me that he is centuries old!”

“I find him fascinating,” admitted Darcy.

“Well *I* find him revolting!” interrupted Anne as she joined them. “*Look* at my mother!”

“She looks wonderful,” pointed out Jane.

“She is ill, Jane,” said Anne angrily. “And she is wasting the time that she has on this quackery!”

“Miss Fletcher looks very well too, you cannot deny it,” said Elizabeth nodding to that lady, who was spinning about the room with an officer. “It is excessively odd.”

“Ever since his arrival, Mama has refused to discuss anything with me regarding her illness,” said Anne, angrily.

Elizabeth decided that she would ask Darcy to speak to Lady Catherine about that soon. It was rather unkind of her host to make Anne worry.

“Of what are we all speaking?” asked Lady Gordon as she approached with her husband.

“Lady Gordon, we were just remarking on how interesting the *comte* is,” Elizabeth said.

“Interesting! We just left him on the terrace, where we spent an astounding half hour with the man, who confounded us quite easily with his tales of transmutation!” said Sir Charles.

“Just now? You mean to say that you *just* left him?” Elizabeth said curiously.

“Yes, not even a moment ago,” answered Lady Gordon.

“But I have only just left him on the dance floor, where I spent a half hour discussing jewels with him, and he told me of Catherine the Great,” Elizabeth said in bewilderment.

“We saw you,” Jane agreed.

“*Comte!*” Elizabeth said, perhaps a bit louder than she usually might, in an effort to get the man’s attention as he passed several feet away. “Sir Charles and Lady Gordon say that they just left you on the terrace, sir. But you just left me

on the dance floor not five minutes past. How could you be in two places at once, *monsieur*?”

The *comte* bowed over her hand and kissed it. “It is not impossible, *mademoiselle*.”

* * *

ELIZABETH TOOK Darcy’s arm as they took to the floor for their second dance. They were officially courting, so they could enjoy three without scandal. Elizabeth wished she could dance with him all night.

“One day, we must hire a musician to play from behind a screen, so we might dance together all night,” Elizabeth sighed in happiness. “At least once a week.”

“That sounds like heaven to me,” Darcy said, content to be in her company again. “I cannot speak to how glad I am to be back in your company. I have missed you sorely, and just to look upon you gladdens my heart. Your eyes, they sparkle with such fire and intelligence. Every time you look at me, I am both unravelled and made whole again.”

“You once told me of your admiration, and now I must return your praise, for I have come to admire not only your character, but the heart that I know lies beneath it,” Elizabeth confessed, blushing.

“Elizabeth, I have struggled to find an appropriate time to speak privately with you since I arrived. At first I had thought to wait until the end of our visit, but I find I simply cannot. Would you accompany me for a short moment on the terrace when we have completed our dance?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth breathed.

Darcy *had* been thwarted since he arrived. First by Anne, his aunt, his sister, *her* sisters! Bourne House was constantly so full, and no one seemed to have any pity for a man who simply wished to propose before he burst.

The dance ended, and Elizabeth laid her hand on Darcy’s arm as he led her to the terrace. She wagged her brow and tilted her head to Jane, a signal between them for the other to

follow. Jane would wait at the door to the terrace to preserve Elizabeth's reputation.

Sadly, the couple never made it outside.

Just as they began to exit the assembly room, Mr Woodhouse cried, "Emma!" Elizabeth turned to see Miss Woodhouse swoon, and the room was thrown into disorder.

CHAPTER 32



Late the following morning, Elizabeth muttered to herself as she picked her way to the castle, one of her favourite routes. Lydia had elected not to accompany her; it was raining lightly, which did not concern Elizabeth, but her youngest sister objected to such activities in inclement weather. Her preferred companion, Mr Darcy, had not appeared this morning when she came downstairs for their walk, though she waited for nearly half an hour. She was instead accompanied by Lady Catherine's footman, and one of Darcy's grooms.

The previous evening had ended in chaos. Elizabeth was suspicious that Miss Woodhouse had only swooned to prevent Elizabeth and Darcy from going onto the terrace alone. The young woman watched the pair of them closely, and with disapproval, all evening. Elizabeth was quite nearly ready to tell the young woman to mind her own business. For heaven's sake, even Mr Darcy's uncle, Lord Matlock, approved of her, and had no objection to her family or background and *he* worked with the prime minister and the King! If her family in trade was not a concern for Lord Matlock, what business was it of Miss Woodhouse to have an opinion?

Indeed, Darcy had lost no time becoming well acquainted with her Uncle Gardiner, and the men had all recently undertaken some important new investments together. Even Mr Bennet had contributed something to it in the hopes of setting a sum aside for Mrs Bennet. Mr Bingley was keen to improve his fortune, so that Jane and any daughters would be well provided for, should they indeed wed. Darcy had no such

worries, his fortune being quite a bit larger than rumour gave him credit for, but he was always interested in new investments.

How lovely it would have been to wake an engaged woman today, with nothing to worry about but planning her wedding. Instead, last night, just after Miss Woodhouse had swooned, Mr Woodhouse had turned on the *comte*, and vented his spleen upon the foreign nobleman in anger.

“What kind of physician do you call yourself? That you will watch a young woman suffer, and do nothing!” shouted Mr Woodhouse angrily at the *comte*.

“I never called myself a physician. I am an alchemist. I have skills in medicine. There is no help that I can give her,” answered St Germain.

“You have never even examined her!” exclaimed Mr Woodhouse, outraged.

“It is not necessary that I do so. I know what ails her, and so does she. I cannot help her,” insisted the *comte*.

“What can you mean by such nonsense?” sneered Anne. “Why do you speak in circles? What have you to hide?”

“I hide nothing,” answered St Germain, untroubled.

“Anne, how dare you speak to the *comte* in such a manner?” objected Lady Catherine. “Woodhouse, it is hardly his fault if he has no remedy for your daughter. Have you reacted to every doctor in this manner?”

“*He* has not even *tried*,” ground out Mr Woodhouse.

“Then you ought to thank him for refusing to give you false hope. I am not in the way of knowing what ails Miss Woodhouse, but it does not appear to be fatal. *Comte*, is she dying?”

“She will live,” the man answered simply.

“But what is wrong with her?” begged Mr Woodhouse.

“She suffers on behalf of another. When they are cured, so will she be,” said St Germain.

“*What in the blazes does that mean?*” demanded Woodhouse.

“It is not my place to say,” answered St Germain mysteriously.

Miss Woodhouse sat quietly in a chair as the ladies fanned her and attempted to ply her with refreshment. She eyed Elizabeth and Mr Darcy unobtrusively, but Elizabeth detected it. She seemed uncomfortable by her father’s confrontation with the *comte*, but otherwise, Elizabeth thought she seemed secretly satisfied with herself.

“I am certain she saw that Darcy and I were slipping outside, and swooned on purpose,” Elizabeth complained to Jane a short time later.

“*Lizzy*, what on earth would cause you to make such an accusation?” gasped Jane.

“She does not like that Darcy is courting me,” pointed out Elizabeth. “She believes he ought to be courting Priscilla. You know this, Jane.”

“I do, but to think she would stoop to deception! I cannot believe it of Miss Woodhouse,” said Jane.

“Jane, you barely know her,” said Elizabeth, exasperated. “You see how she avoids all of us except for Anne and Priscilla. You and I have an uncle in trade, and you are being courted by the son of a tradesman. Next time you are in company with her, attempt to make conversation with her. She will treat you as beneath contempt.”

“Listen to your sister, Jane,” said Priscilla as she and Anne joined them. “Miss Woodhouse is a veritable snob.”

“But do not be hurt when she snubs you, Jane,” interrupted Caroline, joining their party a moment after Anne and Priscilla. “She *will* snub you, make no mistake about that, but do not let it hurt you. You are worth six of her!”

“What do you think the *comte* meant about her illness?” Anne asked Elizabeth curiously.

“I am certain that I do not know, but it was all very mysterious, was it not?” Elizabeth answered her friend.

“I do not like the *comte’s* manner of pronouncing people ill,” said Anne firmly, as Lady Catherine beckoned to them, and they all hurried over to learn that Darcy had ordered their carriages. The magic of the evening had vanished, and most of the gentry were returning home.

* * *

SHAKING herself from her recollections of the previous evening, Elizabeth turned her attention to the magnificent castle in front of her as she crested a small hill. Elizabeth loved this castle. It filled her imagination with fancies of every kind, romantic, gothic, tragic, historic. It almost made her wish to write fanciful stories about it, and wondered, if she was not to marry Darcy, if she might try her hand at novels, and live by her pen.

She skirted around the park to the edge of the trees, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. She had been assured by the locals that she was unlikely to be bothered if she walked there, for others from nearby frequently cut across the property, but strictly speaking, she was still trespassing, and she had no desire to disturb anyone.

She gasped in surprise when from behind a tree, stepped none but the *comte*. “*Monsieur le Comte*, I beg your pardon, you quite startled me!”

“*Pardon, mademoiselle*, it was not my intention to frighten you.” The *comte* bowed.

“Were you visiting the occupants of the castle?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

The *comte* laughed. “Before breakfast? *Non, mademoiselle*, I have been enough amongst society that even I would not so presume. Like yourself, I am only enjoying the morning. The castle, it is *impressionnant*, is it not?”

Elizabeth smiled in excitement. “I find it delightful. It is such an imaginative prospect. It has occurred to me that a writer with a shred of artistry could write a hundred stories

about such a place. My youngest sister and I often make up stories about the woman that they say lives here when we walk, for amusement, not unlike your fancy with the jewels. Before you joined me, I was imagining that the castle is inhabited by a famous opera singer, who was reviled by society after being disfigured in a fire.”

The *comte* barked out a sudden and surprising laugh. “Let me try... Let us see... An elderly woman of foreign descent, the locals say... Hmmmm... Once a great beauty, perhaps the inhabitant of the castle was once the lover of a great king... She fled her home to save her life... Now she lives in hiding, guarding a precious secret.” He grinned at her. “How was that?”

“Very imaginative, Lydia would approve very much,” Elizabeth laughed. A snap behind her reminded her of the servants who were waiting for her to finish her exercise so they could go about their chores. “I must return to Bourne House, *Monsieur*; good morning to you.”

The mysterious man bowed as Elizabeth dropped a curtsy and turned back the way she came.

* * *

DARCY’S COUNTENANCE was thunderous as he descended the stairs for breakfast. His valet, Mr Winston, had fallen ill in the night, and had not the strength to rise on time to wake his master that morning. Darcy was not angry with his man, he knew Winston must be half dead to excuse shirking his duty. Darcy had woken on his own after Elizabeth had already left, dressed himself, and went to the servants’ quarters to see to his man’s welfare. Winston had a terrible fever, and was raving and delusional. It had taken three footmen to keep him in bed once the man had decided that he must get up and go about his work. The housekeeper was now plying the man with willow bark tea, and herbs from the stillroom. Darcy hoped the fever would be of short duration, and would not prove contagious.

He arrived in the breakfast room just in time to privately explain to Elizabeth how his morning had gone. Thankfully, she was not upset, and perhaps the lady might not have liked

being proposed to on a walk in the rain anyway. The more he thought about it, the more he determined that it was selfish of him not to wait for a properly romantic moment. Elizabeth ought not have to settle for a mediocre proposal merely because he was impatient. He would think more upon the matter.

Darcy sat between Elizabeth and Georgiana, and listened to the ladies and gentlemen around the table make their plans for the day. Anne, Priscilla, and Caroline planned to stay at Bourne House with Lady Catherine to receive morning calls. Elizabeth, Jane, and Mary had plans to visit the shoemaker for new slippers to match the gowns they had commissioned. Georgiana and Lydia wished to visit Miss Fletcher, and practise the harp with that lady. Mrs Annesley would accompany them. They all planned to go to the beach later in the afternoon, if the skies cleared, and enjoy the delights of sea bathing or parading on the shore, and the company of the neighbours.

Darcy and Bingley had promised that if the light rain did indeed cease, that they would give William Bennet some further instruction in the game of cricket. A match was coming up in a few weeks, and all of the gentlemen in the area had agreed to play against the local tradesmen. Such competitions were popular at seaside resorts and in country villages. The men were always keen to play, the ladies were always keen to observe and cheer, and the entire village often turned out to watch. They had started teaching him the day after they arrived in Eastbourne, and William Bennet was an unexpected prodigy of the game, the coordination of his hands and eyes not at all clumsy once he understood the rules. He had an uncanny ability when it came to watching the ball, and could even predict what direction and how far it would go before he struck it with the bat. The gentlemen were excited to have him as their secret weapon, and had committed to practising as often as possible.

After breakfast, Darcy found a quiet moment with Elizabeth in the garden as she waited for her sisters to fetch their bonnets for their outing. "I was disappointed not to have the conversation that we intended last night, and even more

disappointed this morning when I woke so late. I apologise,” said Darcy, as they picked their way along the dampened path. The rain had indeed stopped, and the sun was shining beautifully. “But then after further reflection, I decided that perhaps I was being unfair. You deserve better than a hasty conversation within earshot of the entire town, or worse, one in the rain. I should not be so selfish and impatient. I will find the right moment to ask my question.”

“I ought to be hesitant to confess how much joy I might have felt to have such a conversation, even in the rain,” admitted Elizabeth shyly. “I hope you will not wait too long to find the perfect time.”

“You are decided then? Are you certain of your feelings?” he asked, his heart swelling until he thought it might burst. *If only she might love me as I do her, I should never ask for anything ever again.*

“I am as certain of my feelings as one as inexperienced as myself could be, under the circumstances,” Elizabeth confessed. “I have sought the advice of my aunt, who shares a love match with my uncle. She tells me that though what we feel now seems like true love, it is rather the most simplistic form of love. The only thing that can make it develop into *true love*, is to unite ourselves, and set to the work of devoting ourselves to one another. My aunt says that it takes time, years of hard work and commitment to complete the abiding bond that we seek. I am keen to learn how much more I could love you, and admit to feeling rather impatient to embark upon the endeavour.”

Darcy’s heart soared. He took her hand and placed a kiss upon the inside of her wrist. “The feeling is entirely mutual, Elizabeth. I will not take too long to find the perfect moment,” he promised.

CHAPTER 33



The men left to attend to their practise, and the ladies departed in the carriages to see to their outings. At the appointed visiting hour, the usual crowd fell upon Bourne House. Mr Woodhouse arrived, without his daughter, whom he claimed was resting. Sir Albert Swinton and Lord Bexley both called and resumed courting Anne in earnest.

Anne had no interest in either gentleman since she still had no intention of marrying. She had improved her strength since her stay in Hertfordshire, but she was still by no means a strong or healthy woman. The cessation of her tonics had improved her health more than anything, but Anne would never consent to wed or bear a child. She intended to ask her cousin Richard to find a bride, bring his family to reside at Rosings Park to run it for her, and inherit upon her death. There was also the possibility of living at Pemberley or Matlock with her other relations, that is if her cousin Darcy ever wed and made it acceptable for her to live in his home. It was obvious that the day would not be long in coming.

Lord Lennox called upon Priscilla, who bore his attentions with impatience and irritation. It seemed at each visit, that the man was more interested in her father and brother than he was in herself. He asked endless questions about her father's injury, and whether or not he was well enough to correspond with his party regarding parliamentary meetings. Did she think he would journey to Eastbourne to visit her aunt soon, or to London for the general elections in October? Priscilla found such inquiries tedious and banal, and could not understand why the man cared. She offered to send an introductory letter

to her father to open correspondence with the young earl if he wished to pepper her father with questions about his business.

Priscilla did not realise that Sir Albert and Lord Bexley were peppering Anne with similar questions, as well as pointed questions about Richard's activities, which Anne knew even less about than her uncle's condition. After several intrusive inquiries, Anne firmly told both men that she was not her cousin's keeper, and had no notion of his whereabouts. The men were all of an age, and both noblemen claimed that they were only curious about the colonel's travels since they had all parted ways at Cambridge.

Georgiana and Lydia were disappointed to find Miss Fletcher unable to receive callers. "She danced last night at the assembly, her father is rather put out with her for wasting her strength, miss," confided the maid who answered the door. "The *comte* has been called, and it is hoped that he will administer another elixir."

The girls thanked the maid, and returned to their carriage. "Let us go to the confectioners, and the library, Georgie. I crave a tin of chocolate drops¹, and we can see if they have any of those prawlongs² you enjoyed so much last time," said Lydia.

Georgiana agreed, and when they arrived at the library, she sent a local boy with a message to find her brother at the shore where he was practising cricket with the other men, and inform him of her change in plans. It would not do for him not to know her whereabouts, considering that Mr Wickham might be in the vicinity. Georgiana had not mentioned seeing the man to Lydia, who had not confessed to her adventure following him, so sadly, the others did not know for certain that he *was* present, and who he was meeting with.

Georgiana perused the volumes in the library, as Lydia searched for a book her father had instructed her to read and discuss with him by correspondence, if she could find it. Mrs Annesley was engaged in a discussion with the proprietor and his wife about a novel she was looking for. Suddenly,

Georgiana gave a squeak as she was grasped firmly by her arm, and dragged into a darkened corner.

“Richard!” she gasped. “I knew it was you! My brother did not believe me!”

“Darcy needs to begin taking you seriously, poppet,” Richard answered in semi-outrage. “I shall tell him so again, directly.”

“Says the man who just called me poppet,” she giggled.

“Georgie, you are old and wise enough for me to give keen attention to your every concern, but you will always be poppet to me,” her cousin said endearingly. “Even when you are an old crone with four dozen grandchildren.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “Brother said you were on a special assignment.”

“*I am* on a special assignment. I cannot tell you the nature of it, poppet, but I fear I must ask for your assistance. There are some men visiting Bourne House regularly, and I must get closer to them, in order to learn their intentions.”

“Do you mean the noblemen who are attempting to court Anne and Priscilla?” asked Georgiana. “Priscilla says they are rakes, every single one.”

“I fear they may be worse than rakes, Georgie, and I have my suspicions regarding why they have turned up here without warning, and begun to curry favour with the ladies of our family,” explained Richard. “Do you know what they talk about?”

“They ask a great many questions about Lord Matlock and his injury, his contact with parliament and the war office, even though he is missing the session, and there may have been at least one inquiry as to your whereabouts, I believe the gentlemen claimed to know you from school.”

“*Know* is a generous description. I would say I knew *of them*,” said Richard. “They were not of my set. Their families have all been in trouble financially for many years, and such boys could cause trouble with their cunning and desperation to make good connections at school. Their sort was likely to

compromise one's sister on a visit to one's home. I avoided young men like them, sons of gamblers and degenerates, they were all as troublesome and reckless as their forebears, every last one. Will you assist me to hide in the house, Georgie? I wish to observe their behaviour amongst my kin," Richard asked. "I cannot approach your brother. He is being followed, and so is Aunt Catherine. I have not determined why yet, so you must not tell them. The followers do not appear aggressive, they are just watching, and I mean to learn the reason."

"I will help you, but I do not believe that I am skilled enough to do so without Torrens suspecting something. He has become excessively observant about security since everyone became aware that Aunt Catherine is ill, and that Anne needs extra protection. You know he will be certain to catch you out in a moment," worried Georgiana."

"There is no chance he will not tell Aunt Catherine. He is entirely loyal to her," Richard said, thinking aloud.

"Not if we get to her first," said Georgiana with a mischievous smile.

"Georgiana, the more who know, the more likely that I should be exposed. I am at liberty to create my own allies, and find those I trust for help, but our aunt..." Richard shook his head in uncertainty.

"Our aunt trusts me, and she trusts you. That is enough," insisted Georgie. "I have become quite close with her since our time at Netherfield. She depends upon the solace she receives from me that comforts her in the absence of my mother's support. I too, have learned to confide in her, as unto a mother, and I have received nothing but love, approval, and support from her. Though she still is not always tactful, I know she would help me with anything. If I confide to her that you cannot share your mission, but that you are nearby in the service of your duty, and require the assistance of Torrens, she would instruct the man to follow your every command, and to keep silent on the matter. I am certain of it. Aunt may not show it, but she is proud of your service to the Crown. You, cousin, your service, is an example of our family's devotion to

His Majesty, and Aunt is a proud Englishwoman who would do anything required to assist you in your duty.”

Richard hesitated, weighing the danger. He believed his cousin was right. He would take the risk; his aunt would be so proud of any small service their family could contribute to The Crown, that she would do what Georgiana asked. “I am proud of you cousin, for your insight,” he said. “I shall wait for you in the back of the garden tomorrow morning for our aunt’s answer.”

Georgiana spun about as her companion’s voice suddenly was heard behind her. “Miss Darcy, what on earth are you doing back here?”

“Oh!” gasped Georgiana. “Miss Annesley, you quite startled me! I was just taken by a whim of fancy, exploring this curiously darkened little corner.”

Richard had already somehow disappeared into thin air, though she could not fathom how he had escaped. She followed her companion obediently back into the centre of the shop. Lydia had located her book, and it appeared interesting enough that Georgiana offered to read it with her, and they could discuss it together, as well as with Mr Bennet by post. The ladies took their volumes and continued to the confectioners, where Georgie purchased some prawlongs for herself and Richard, who enjoyed them greatly, a packet of licorice for her brother, and a tin of marzipan for her aunt.

* * *

IT WAS AN EVENTFUL DAY. Georgiana seemed to trip over intrigue at every turn. Later that afternoon, whilst she read in the garden, she heard whispers from the other side of the hedge, and she drew silently closer in curiosity.

“You finally have something for me?” said a rough voice from the other side of the hedge.

“I do,” came the voice of Marigold, an upstairs maid who had accompanied the family from Rosings, and had been with the family for years. “As ye know, sir, me brother works fer Lord Matlock. He writes that ‘is lordship receives and sends a

packet of letters from Downing Street an' 'is Majesty every day."

"Of course he does! He's the Foreign Secretary, and this country is always at war! He is fortunate that His Majesty does not demand his resignation, having been away for so long. You better not have wasted my time coming here to hear about expresses from the PM."

"No sir. Me brother got 'imself a copy o' the key to 'is lordships study, an' 'e's been takin a packet or two o' letters every night when the 'house goes to bed. It's 'is job to douse the candles and lock up at night, an' 'e's the first about in the mornings, being lowest footman. 'E takes em at night and copies 'em, and returns 'em in the morning afore anyone's about. Got a whole packet o' them 'ere, sir. It took longer than we wished because 'e had to travel through two villages to send 'em without being known an' questions asked. An' I had to retrieve 'em from the post under a false name. If such a parcel come in the post, there'd be questions, the 'ole house would be curious, sir."

"If your brother has that sort of access to Lord Matlock's papers, we will send someone to stay in the area to retrieve them. I will meet you here tomorrow at this time to give you instructions of how they will approach him," whispered the man in a rough voice.

Georgiana was appalled as she moved quickly away from the hedge to avoid detection. Traitors! Traitors and disloyal servants in the houses of Matlock and de Bourgh! The scandal would be terrible, and her aunt would be enraged. Georgiana could not tell her yet. No one could know but Richard.

* * *

LATER THAT EVENING, after all parties had retired to bed, Georgiana visited her aunt in her suite. "Is all well, niece?" Lady Catherine asked kindly. "You are not in any trouble, are you? If you are, I am grateful that you trusted me enough to come. You always may. I will always be here for you, the daughter of my dear sister Anne. You can tell me anything,

without fear. I will always help you, even if I do not agree with your actions.”

“I thank you, aunt. I am so grateful to know I always have your support. That *is* why I came. *Not* because I am in trouble,” Georgiana said in a rush. “I hope that I am smart enough never to find myself in trouble, but because I know I can trust you when I need help.”

“What is it, Niece?” Lady Catherine asked encouragingly.

“Recently, when I was out with my brother, I was certain I saw my cousin Richard,” Georgiana told her aunt. “I told my brother, who did not believe me. But it *was* Richard, and he approached me yesterday secretly at the library.”

“What nonsense, Darcy, not believing you! You are not some flibberty-gibbet!” snorted her aunt in derision. “I will have a word with that boy. You are nearly a woman, and old enough to be considered with a measure of respect. Your grandmother was a mother by your age! What is my nephew Fitzwilliam doing in Eastbourne? I thought he was on a special mission for the war office.”

“He *is* on a special mission, and so you must wait to speak with my brother, for Richard requires our discretion,” explained Georgiana. “I have no idea what his mission entails, but he requires access to this house, he is watching someone who visits us regularly, and must follow them in the service of his duty. I can assist him, but I know we will not escape Torrens’s notice.”

“And Torrens will tell me all. Was it your idea to come and seek my secrecy?” asked Lady Catherine, as Georgiana nodded. “That gratifies me. Is it the *comte* he is watching? Go and tell the footman in the hall to summon Torrens.” Her niece did so, then returned to her chair, and their conversation.

“I do not believe it is the *comte*. He did not mention him,” Georgiana evaded, not wishing to give away anything Richard had asked her about the younger men. He had not given her permission to share his inquiries.

“And you will not tell me who he did mention. That is intelligent of you. You must give him any aid that he requires as long as it does not put you in peril. All he has asked for is access to this house when we are having visitors?” said Lady Catherine.

“Yes, Aunt,” Georgie affirmed. Her aunt instructed her to pour each of them a glass of wine from a decanter on a nearby table while they waited. After a few moments, they were joined by the butler.

“Torrens, you have been a trusted retainer of this family for decades,” said Lady Catherine.

“It has been my honour, your ladyship.” The butler bowed respectfully. Torrens was the epitome of the perfect English butler. A tall man, topping six feet, he was never anything other than impeccably turned out. He never spoke out of turn, and when he did speak it was in a deep, distinctive baritone. He ran the household to perfection, and with his expertise, Lady Catherine never had troubles with her staff. When Georgiana was a small child she had been terrified of him, though she acknowledged now that there had been no good reason for it. He was an extremely proper and stern, but kindly man.

“Our family must now demonstrate our complete trust in you, Torrens. I am certain you will not disappoint me,” continued Lady Catherine. “My nephew, Colonel Fitzwilliam, is in the vicinity, on a special assignment in service to the Crown, and requires our assistance and utmost discretion.”

“I would consider it a privilege to assist Colonel Fitzwilliam in his duty, your ladyship,” Mr Torrens assured her.

“You will allow him access to this house whenever he requires it. You will help him enter and exit without detection. Whatever he requires of you, you will do. If he sends you a message through Miss Darcy, you will follow it implicitly and without question. What he and the Crown require most from you is your utmost secrecy. You will not report his

movements, nor his requests, to me, nor to anyone else,” Lady Catherine directed.

“I understand, your ladyship. I am proud to do my duty to the de Bourgh family, and to my country. I shall wait for Colonel Fitzwilliam to approach me, and follow his instructions implicitly.” Mr Torrens bowed again and left the room.

“Tell Fitzwilliam that I am gratified that he trusted me with his confidence, Georgiana, and that he shall not regret it; whatever he requires, I will provide,” Lady Catherine instructed her niece as they bid one another good night.

“Thank you, Aunt; I will,” Georgiana promised as she withdrew to her own room.

1 Chocolate drops were a popular sweet in the Regency, and were similar to the chocolate nonpareils that are sold in stores now.

2 Prawlong is an earlier term for pralines, a caramel covered confection containing almonds, and sometimes hazelnuts or pistachios. Early settlers in New Orleans adapted the recipe for pecans.

CHAPTER 34



The Baltic Sea - 1722

THE BATTERED merchant ship was tossed on the waves in the dark waters off of the Prussian coast. The storm had struck without warning, sneaking up on the merchant vessel in the night. There were few passengers, mostly crewmen who ran about shouting, throwing each other lines, and attempting to control the ship in the violent waters.

One of the passengers, a man dressed all in black, emerged from the lower decks and made his way to the middle of the deck. The captain shouted at the passenger to return to his quarters, but the man lowered himself to the floor and sat cross legged in the middle of the deck. He placed his hands flat upon the deck on each side of him, and stared up into the sky, not moving, not speaking.

Slowly, the ship ceased its violent rocking. The captain and crew looked about them, amazed at the savagery of the storm raging about them, the roughness of the waters, yet the waters immediately around the ship were calm, and the vessel itself bobbed tranquilly. The rain still fell, and the lightning and thunder crashed about them, but the ship remained unharmed.

The crew stood and watched for nearly four hours in the pouring rain, as the man in black sat calmly with his palms against the deck. When the storm finally moved on, the man in black rose, and without saying a word, returned below decks. The men could not agree whether they had the honour of travelling with a sorcerer or a saint, but they docked with the

tide, and breathed a collective sigh of relief when their strange passenger disembarked.

CHAPTER 35



The following afternoon, Georgiana met Richard at the back of the garden and informed him of their aunt's reply, and about the maid. Georgiana did not know what Richard wished Torrens to know, so she arranged for the man to follow her to the garden a quarter hour after she went. Richard did not inform Torrens of the matter, telling Georgiana that she was to stay away from the maid for now, and that he would be present that day to listen to the maid's meeting with the strange man. Georgiana gave him a packet of prawlongs, her cousin's favourite confection, and left him alone with the butler. Richard instructed her that he would reach out to her as little as possible, in case those following her brother began following her too, but that he would watch her and his aunt often to ensure their safety, and that he would find a way to remove the treacherous maid unobtrusively from the house. So far, the ladies were only being stalked in the drawing rooms by their admirers, who called every day. Darcy actually had *two* militia officers in plain attire following him. Richard did not yet feel comfortable in approaching their colonel to determine why.

Georgiana then accompanied Lydia to visit Miss Fletcher, who was feeling better after another elixir had been administered, and had recovered enough to proceed with their appointment. Georgiana and Lydia were looking forward to the call. Georgiana was adept at the harp, but Miss Fletcher was a prodigy when she felt well enough to play, and the two of them had already learned a great deal from the young lady, and enjoyed their visits tremendously.

Later in the afternoon, Richard waited in a secluded spot in the garden. Eventually, he observed the man he had seen with Wickham in Meryton, Huggins, enter the garden and commence waiting for Marigold.

“You idiot girl! How dare your brother waste our time with such foolishness? These are not letters from Downing Street! These are Lord Matlocks private letters!” whispered the man angrily.

“Sir! My brother cannot read well! He did the best he could, but he does not know one letter from another! It was all he could do just to copy them! He says he has not slept in weeks, labouring over them!” protested Marigold. “I can read, and our mum can read, she writes his letters for ‘im but he never did well in school!”

“You mean your brother *told* your mother about this!” Huggins demanded angrily.

“You wanted the information, you threatened me that you would harm my mother if I did not get it, I had no other way to contact my brother to watch the house!” Marigold cried.

“Damned ignorant, idiot peasants!” swore Huggins. The maid fled back to the house, and the man quickly vanished from the garden.

A great weight lifted from Richard’s chest. He knew his father would not have left packets from Whitehall out where they could be found. Those would not even be in his study. Richard knew all too well that Marigold’s brother Harry could not only read and write, and might be the lowest footman, but he had distinguished himself at the estate school. Richard himself had visited the school on behalf of the family, and bestowed a Johnson’s Dictionary upon him when he had taken a first in exams seven years before. Once he began working at the house, he had quickly been taken under the butler’s wing. Only his young age of eighteen prevented him from being given a more senior position, but the butler expected the young man to make first footman by his majority, and under-butler by five and twenty.

Harry Tupper was intelligent enough to even have possibly made up the letters entirely, they may not even be stolen from Lord Matlock's study at all. In his few years working at the big house, the young man had already shed his northern accent, and now nearly spoke like the butler he hoped to be one day. If he pretended to write poorly, he could have made up any number of unimportant missives. What was important was that the servants of Matlock and the House of de Bourgh might be placed in a difficult situation, but they were *not* traitors. Everyone in the family would have been devastated if it had been true. Richard must find a way to assist the two before too much time passed, and the man Huggins made even more demands of them.

* * *

THREE DAYS LATER, Harry Tupper found himself in Lord Matlock's bedroom. He had no idea why he had been summoned, and the butler, Mr Ludlow, was concerned beyond anything, and was not happy to vacate the room at his lordship's dismissal.

"Check the door," Matlock said to his secretary, Miles Percival, a moment after the butler had gone. He regarded the young man as Percival obeyed, ensuring that the butler, nor anyone else had lingered by the entrance to the room.

"I have just a few moments ago received an express from my second son, an express so confidential, that it came with two riders, and under the condition that it be handed to no one other than myself," said Matlock to the boy. This was not an uncommon practice, and Lord Matlock kept messengers on staff waiting for his and his family's missives at different points along the road to Derbyshire. It was necessary, given the nature of his position in the government, that often certain messages must be protected at all costs. Sending two riders, and mixing the riders who rode together up often, ensured that none would open the documents. "Do you know what it says?"

"No sir," said Harry Tupper in confusion, but beginning to feel nervous. What if their trick had been discovered, but was misunderstood?

“No, nor do I,” said Matlock, passing him the sealed missive. “It is addressed to you.”

Harry opened the letter and read Colonel Fitzwilliam’s bold script.

TUPPER,

You must confide yours and your sister’s problem to my father immediately, before something unfortunate happens to your family. You have been clever, but the time to seek my father’s protection has come. I will do what I can in Eastbourne to see to the safety of Marigold.

F

HARRY READ the message and passed it to Lord Matlock. “Oh, bother,” said his lordship. “Whatever have you got yourself into, Harry?”

“It’s a pickle, sir,” said Harry in embarrassment. “I ought to have come to you straight away, but my sister, she was afraid for our mother.”

“This is your sister Marigold, who works for my sister Lady Catherine at Rosings Park?” inquired Matlock.

“Yes, sir,” answered Harry. “She was approached by an unknown man. The man described our mother and our cottage to her, and threatened that if she did not make me pass information about your activities, that our mother would be hurt. They threatened Marigold too, sir. Threatened her with consequences that ought never befall a girl, if you take my meaning.”

“How horrible for Marigold – she must have been terrified,” said Matlock. “And what did you do?”

“I thought up a plan, sir, to make them believe us ignorant and uneducated,” explained Harry. “I made up a packet of letters, silly things, notes from Lady Catherine about nonsense with the young ladies in Eastbourne, short missives or invitations from unimportant people that I have met here and have a good knowledge of. I copied them in an unschooled hand, made it look very illiterate, and sent it to her and told her to tell them that I stole them from your study and copied them.

When they grew angry with her and said that they were not what they wanted, she was to tell them that I had struggled in school and could barely read. And that I had to have my mother read her the letter that she had sent me, and that I did not know one letter from another. The only thing she could tell them was that I had told them that you receive a great deal of mail, sir, and that as a lower footman, I rarely wait upon you in your rooms. We hoped that would be believable sir, for Marigold fears for our mother, sir, but neither of us wishes to be a traitor.”

“You are correct, you ought to have come to me immediately.” Lord Matlock sighed. “But I can see that you meant well, and there is no harm done. We must see to your mother’s safety. The Widower Gordon has been calling upon her, did you know? Perhaps if she marries again, she will be safer under a man’s roof.”

“I did know that, sir, and he is a fine man. I’d have no objection to seeing my ma well cared for,” said Harry. “She is not too old to take on another husband if she has a mind to.”

“I will speak to Ludlow, and have him keep you indoors for the time being,” said Matlock. “I hope we can trust Richard to keep an eye on your sister.”

* * *

ELIZABETH HAD little success finding an acceptable time to speak to Lady Catherine alone regarding her refusal to be open with her daughter, nor had she had the opportunity to ask Darcy to do so. Lady Catherine consulted with the *comte* and the two surgeons weekly, though she would no longer allow Anne to accompany her, nor would she tell anyone what was discussed at the appointments, nor what treatments were planned. Anne’s anxiety and fear grew as a result, and it made her difficult, and waspish in the presence of the *comte*.

The *comte* spent a great deal of time amongst them and their party. He called upon them every day, and dined with them frequently, though he never ate. His servant accompanied him everywhere, and kept him supplied with mineral water, which was all the man drank. He always wore black from head

to toe, and was always tinkling from the sheer number of gold and diamond trinkets he adorned his attire with. He constantly kept whatever party he engaged with entertained, telling stories about the courts of Catherine the Great, Louis XV, and other royals.

“I have been to so many royal courts that I am on first name terms with every noble ghost in Europe,” the man joked one night at Lady Catherine’s table.

Anne, piqued as usual with the *comte*, wished to put the man on the spot, and she addressed his servant who was standing behind him. “Is it true that your master is over a thousand years old, then?”

“I could not say, *mademoiselle*, for I myself am only three centuries old,” came the reply that Denomme gave to everyone who asked such a question.

“Anne, do not be irksome,” chided Lady Catherine.

“Amesbury, we could use your influence with the war office. MacArthur and I just sent up a demand that they cease neglecting the Martello Tower, and send a proper regiment, and a few naval vessels to protect the waters. The East Sussex Volunteer Corps and the coastal blockade are mostly concerned with smuggling, they cannot be expected to defend us. I beg you to send a letter yourself,” said Sir Charles Gordon, a local baron who owned an estate perhaps five miles away from town.

“Preposterous!” barked Lord Amesbury.

“The protection of the coast and town is preposterous?” asked Darcy. Sir Charles’s suggestion did not sound very silly to him.

“Indeed! Every regiment sent here would be a regiment wasted when they are needed in Chichester!” said Lord Amesbury dismissively.

“What is happening in Chichester?” asked Mr Woodhouse curiously.

“There is a Luddite uprising there, if you can believe it,” answered Lord Amesbury. “I just received word of it this

morning, from Colonel Allen, with a warning in case the mills to the north in Westham follow suit. I have investments there. Allen says they cannot fathom what got it started, the mill owners there have been generous to their workers, so generous that the owners of other mills in the region are complaining, but as of a few days ago, there was rioting there. In any case, the French are preparing to attack Russia. They have no time to attack our coast as well.”

“Darcy, those could be our mills!” said Bingley in agitation.

“Do you have investments in Chichester?” asked Jane.

“Indeed we do, Miss Bennet,” answered Darcy in concern. “It is a recent investment that we made in partnership with your father and uncle. Bingley, I believe we ought to travel to Chichester first thing in the morning.”

“Oh dear,” said Jane. “We should hate for you to have to go away, but I understand if your investments are at risk.”

“I do hope for Papa’s sake, and for the rest of the gentlemen involved, that all will be well,” said Elizabeth.

“I shall pray for the workers, that they might see sense, and not injure themselves or others, and that if they have been misled, that they will see the error of their ways,” said Mary devoutly.

“You are a good girl, Miss Mary. Bennet, you have chosen your future wife well,” said Lady Catherine. “Nephew, I hope that if you do have to leave, that you will not be gone long. I would prefer to have your escort when we attend Lady Amesbury’s ball.”

“*Must we* discuss trade?” asked Miss Woodhouse in disgust. “Whatever has happened to society?”

“It is a fiction that gentlemen never invest in trade, dear,” said her father.

“*You* do not!” replied Miss Woodhouse indignantly.

“No, but I am interested in doing so,” said Mr Woodhouse. “I had investments before your dear mother passed. I ought to

ask Knightley to seek out something promising.”

“Oh!” said Miss Woodhouse in distress.

“Feeling better, *mademoiselle*?” asked the *comte* slyly across the table. Miss Woodhouse blushed scarlet as her father glared at him. Elizabeth and the rest of the young ladies looked at each other across the table in perplexity, and Lady Catherine’s guests, as usual when the *comte* spoke, wondered what in the world he meant.

CHAPTER 36



The following morning, Darcy and Bingley prepared to leave by dawn. As they made their way downstairs, Darcy encountered Elizabeth and his sister. Elizabeth was leaving for her walk as soon as Jane came downstairs, and Georgiana had woken early to see her brother off, as she had always done since she was old enough. The carriage had just arrived, and the men were ready to leave, though Torrens was not yet about with their hats and canes. When the two couples had said their farewells, Elizabeth and Jane departed for their walk. Georgiana bid her brother and Mr Bingley a safe journey, and turned into the parlour.

“Go ahead, Bingley, I will find them and follow you out. I believe Torrens stores them in here,” she heard her brother say as Bingley went out the front door, and Darcy opened a closet, followed by a strange yelp of surprise.

Darcy stood open mouthed in amazement to see his cousin Richard hiding in the closet. “*You will be silent,*” his cousin hissed as he pulled the door closed.

Georgiana returned quickly from the drawing room. “Is all well, brother?”

Darcy shook his head as if he felt strange, “I just... Well...”

Georgiana clasped her brother’s hand and dragged him upstairs, and into her room, where she dismissed Hopkins. When they were alone, she said, “What did you see?”

“I... I’m not sure I ought...” answered Darcy uncertainly.

“Fitzwilliam! I insist that you tell me exactly what disturbed you!” she insisted.

“Richard was hiding in the closet,” said Darcy.

“I thought it would be something like that,” Georgiana said. “I cannot tell you what he is doing there, but I must insist that you say nothing to anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, brother.”

“You mean, *you know* of this?” Darcy said in concern. “What is he doing in the closet? Is he not supposed to be on a mission?”

“He *is* on a mission. I presume he is there because there is a grate in the wall between the closet and the drawing room,” she answered. “I *did* tell you that I saw him. You did not believe me. I will have to tell Torrens immediately he must lock that closet, and any other area Richard uses. We cannot have him caught by a maid or footman.”

“For what purpose is he in the closet?” Darcy demanded.

“I cannot tell you, Brother,” Georgiana refused.

“Georgiana, as your guardian, I command you to tell me!” Darcy insisted.

At this, laughter bubbled up in Georgiana, and she could not help but giggle. She had been far too long in Elizabeth’s company to be cowed now, not by her own sibling. “Brother, I am protecting my other guardian. When he tells me that I may confide in you, I will do so, but for now, I am promised to secrecy.”

“I am *outraged* that Richard has confided in you, and that I had no idea he was even here! Why is he watching this house? Does this mean you are in danger? How dare he bring this upon Aunt Catherine’s house!” Darcy ranted.

“Fitzwilliam, He did not bring anything here, he followed it here. We are not in danger, or at least there is no reason to suspect so now. As you can see, Richard is keeping an eye on us,” his sister assured him.

“Aunt Catherine will be outraged when she learns of whatever this is,” said Darcy, comforted that when his aunt found out, there would be retribution. At Georgiana’s expression, his face fell. “She already knows.”

“We could not very well seek Torren’s secrecy without her permission,” she pointed out.

“I cannot *believe* that *everyone* knows of this but me!” Darcy grumbled.

“Not everyone,” she assured him. When he raised his eyebrows, she said, “Lizzy does not know, nor do the other ladies or gentlemen,” she promised. This did not seem to comfort her brother, though he dutifully promised his secrecy, *of course*, and followed his sister back downstairs.

“Torrens, please assist my brother by bringing his and Mr Bingley’s hats,” Georgiana said meaningfully. “*Give my cousin the key to that closet, so he can lock it from the inside, before anyone else finds him!*” she hissed to the butler when her brother had gone.

Later, after breakfast, the ladies assembled in the drawing room to wait for their callers. Georgiana purposely seated herself in the corner near the grate in the wall, and bid Anne and Priscilla to join her. They both gave her a curious look for her request, but complied, and soon the room was filled with people. Mr Woodhouse was present, as he was nearly every day that they were at home to callers, and Lady Gordon called, as well as the Jenkins sisters, and Mrs Forrester.

As they did every day, Anne and Priscilla’s callers joined them. Sir Albert Swinton and Lord Lennox each brought hothouse flowers, and poured on flattery as if it were cream.

“Miss de Bourgh, how is all at Rosings? How do you and your mother fare there running the estate by yourselves? Do you find the work invigorating?” asked Sir Albert Swinton.

“We do not manage by ourselves entirely. My cousin Darcy comes each spring to assist us, and we are in close contact with him and my uncle throughout the year. They advise us well,” replied Anne.

“I am certain they must,” said Lord Lennox. “How is your father, Lord Matlock, Lady Priscilla?”

“I have not heard from my mother in several days, but the last I heard, he was mending well,” Priscilla answered.

“Was his injury very terrible? Do you think it will force your father to retire from his position as Foreign Secretary?” asked Sir Albert.

“I do not expect so,” answered Priscilla. “It was a terrible break, but he will certainly walk and ride again,”

“He will be lucky then. Not so many ministers are allowed to keep their positions when they fall unwell, or cannot stay in the capital. Especially during wartime,” said Lennox. “Another King or PM might have asked him to step down.”

“Nothing prevents my father from working, sir. He is the most tireless and industrious person I have ever met. I am certain that he works from his bed all day, every day, and must have the fastest royal messengers to relay his messages. Being in the country has never prevented him from carrying out his duties before.”

“Do you believe he will return to town before the elections in October?” asked Swinton.

“You asked me that last time you called, Sir Albert. I have no way of knowing what my father’s physician will allow,” answered Priscilla.

“I am surprised at that, I am certain Lord Matlock must be in constant communication with his sister,” said Lennox.

“Communication, yes, but constant? Why must they be in constant communication? What an odd thing to say. I am certain my father corresponds with his sister as often as he ought, and no more or less.” Priscilla was beginning to find the discussion tiresome.

“Well for him to have sent you all here, alone, and with no male protection-” started Swinton before he was cut off by Anne.

“Why on earth would we need male protection? My mother has been a dowager for many years, we are only too capable of taking care of ourselves.”

“Indeed, Father did not *send* us here at all. We are here so my aunt may consult with a physician, nothing more,” said Priscilla.

“Besides, Darcy and his friend were just here, and William Bennet is in the house,” pointed out Anne.

“Bennet seems a nice enough fellow, but he does not strike me as very protective,” said Swinton. “It is a shame Colonel Fitzwilliam did not accompany Darcy into Eastbourne, now there is a man to have about a house full of ladies in need of protection.”

“Where did you say Colonel Fitzwilliam was again?” asked Lennox. “I cannot recall.”

“We have no idea where my brother is; he is off with the army, doing whatever it is that the army does,” said Priscilla.

“Why, exactly, do we need so much protection? Are you expecting an invasion of the French, Sir Albert?” asked Anne. Lord Lennox suddenly dropped his teacup and broke it.

“Oh dear, and the celandine pattern is Aunt’s favourite,” said Georgiana. “What a shame.”

The little party broke up as the footman came with a dust bin to clean up the broken pieces. The gentlemen took their leave and departed abruptly.

Colonel Allen visited after, and spent some time courting Caroline, but asked nothing in particular that was interesting to Richard, who was able to leave the closet undetected. Later that day, Richard came across Huggins. The thing about spies was that they often had particular patterns of meeting the same people at the same time and place frequently to exchange information. Huggins was no different, and Richard had found one or two of the man’s meeting places, and learned who some of his associates were by following him for days on end.

Richard Fitzwilliam was looking rough. He barely slept, and had little time, nor resources to bathe or shave. He must

have shocked Darcy to no end this morning, he chuckled to himself. It was well that he heard Georgiana dragging Darcy away from the closet immediately after. She would ensure his cousin's silence.

He waited and watched Huggins. Richard had made certain to arrive long before the man or any of his associates might be scouting the area, and found a well hidden place to listen. Huggins was fond of gardens, and seemed to meet people in them frequently. Richard would have to be certain he met Georgiana in other locations besides his aunt's garden whenever possible. Richard watched as Colonel Allen approached Huggins, and the two began to converse.

"I spoke to Lennox and Swinton a short while ago. They are certain that the women know. They said that one of them even taunted them about the plot," opened Colonel Allen.

"My asset insists that the family would never have sent the women. They are not the sort," insisted Huggins. "He knows the family well, and assures me that Matlock would never have sent his daughter and his nieces. The girls are timid and sheltered, the youngest not even being out, and his sister is such a blabber mouth that she cannot be trusted. Every other source I have tapped in that direction agrees, Lady Catherine is no spy. My intelligence is that the old hag is seeing a doctor here. There is no reason to think the women's presence is anything but an unfortunate coincidence."

"The men did say that the ladies said again this morning that the old woman is here to see a doctor," the Colonel assented.

"She has been followed to a specialist that is well established here a number of times, she has been said to have collapsed on the beach, and she looks ill to me, or at least she did when she arrived. Perhaps the physician's treatment is helping. What else did the dandies report?" Huggins demanded.

Allen gave a report of the conversation from Lady Catherine's drawing room, though how the men had interpreted Anne's remark as a taunt was beyond Richard.

Swinton and Lennox must be dense if they believed she had been baiting them.

“I would have felt better about all of this if the foreign secretary had been removed from office. That man has both ears to the ground at all times. His spies are numerous, and he has uncovered more plots than any before him,” complained Allen.

“It was attempted. The best that could be done was to prevent his immediate return to London,” answered Huggins. “I sent someone who knows the family and the area well, but once the first attempt had been made, another was impractical. The man lingered in the area for some weeks, planning to set the house on fire at night if necessary, but Matlock is shrewd, he knew that was no accident that spooked his horse. Security was more than tripled, immediately. They have half a regiment about his house at all times. You should see the escort that accompanies the packets to and from Downing Street every day. This was the best we could do.”

Richard was instantly filled with rage at the understanding that the only contact that knew his family and home well, that was known to Huggins, was Wickham, and that Wickham had planned to burn his home, and kill his family. Wickham had *attacked* his father! He missed the next exchange, so eclipsed he was by fury.

The rest of the conversation was uninteresting, except for the information that the luddite uprising in Chichester had also been contrived by Wickham, who had been sent to hire men and pay them handsomely to stir up the riots, in an effort to lure Darcy away, once he had been followed until Huggins was certain that he was just another dandy, and knew nothing about whatever plot these men were hatching.

* * *

GEORGIANA MET her cousin in the garden later that afternoon. They had agreed that if Georgiana wished to speak with him, she would wait for him to approach her when he was at liberty, and they could prearrange their meetings by Georgiana putting an orchid in her window as a signal for him to come. He had

informed her of where he was sleeping, in case she needed him, but she was never to send a servant there, or to go herself except in the direst emergency. After her meeting with him, Georgiana visited Torrens in his office. "I have spoken with my cousin just now, Torrens. Would you please ask Marigold Tupper to join us?"

"That does not bode well. Yes, Miss Darcy. I shall send for her right away," said the butler. The two sat, and Mr Torrens poured a cup of tea for Georgiana while they waited, and they spoke of his background, about which Georgiana knew nothing, but now that she was older, she was interested, and he humoured her. Marigold looked frightened when she entered the room to find Miss Darcy waiting for her.

"Marigold, we will not discuss your difficult situation in detail here," said Georgiana kindly. "As you are all too aware, there is something afoot in Eastbourne and Derbyshire. Until the matter has been discovered and managed completely, you will tell no one of your recent troubles. All that I will say on the matter at this time is that you are confined to the house until further notice for your safety."

"Oh miss! I fear for my ma!" cried the maid.

"I am told that measures will be taken in Derbyshire to protect your family. For now, you will speak of this to no one. Not I, not Torrens, and not even my Aunt Catherine, until I personally have instructed you otherwise. Absolutely *no one*, Marigold. You will send no mail for now. You will not venture outside of the house for *any reason*. Not even to empty a chamber pot. Not even as far as the garden. Do you understand?"

The maid promised that she did understand, and Torrens informed Georgiana that he would ensure that her instructions were followed to the letter. Miss Marigold was given some sewing to work on alone in her room, and it was put about the house that she was ill and possibly contagious, in case any of the other staff were questioned about her by Huggins or anyone else when they left the house.

* * *

RICHARD HAD his work cut out for him. There was something afoot in Eastbourne, that was plain, and he knew that his father's injury and absence from London had been orchestrated to facilitate it. But there were so many players in this game that he could not follow them all. He needed more men. He must send to London again for more men. His general had been told to excuse him from duty until further notice. To his knowledge, the only ones who knew of the mission was the quartermaster general himself, a brigadier-general who worked in the intelligence office, and that man's secretary, a Colonel Sanford. Only Brigadier-General Spaulding knew his actual identity.

Richard had travelled to the next village to send a message to the quartermaster general's Headquarters, where all three men worked, a week ago, asking for more men. So far, there had been no answer, and no one had arrived. Now he travelled to a village in another direction, and sent another message, asking again for reinforcements, and stressing that as suspected, there *was* a plot afoot. He met again with his young cousin, who asked Elizabeth Bennet to include an obscure message in the letter she sent to Darcy the following day.

*Bourne House,
Eastbourne*

DEAREST,

You have only been gone two days, and I am already selfishly wishing you back. How despicable of me to care about the Amesburys' ball when your investments might suffer, or worse, you or another might be hurt in some abominable riot. I am ashamed of my self-interest, but it has sadly been too long since we danced at the assembly, and I am all eagerness to do so again at a private ball, where I am told that the waltz shall be enjoyed more than once.

Every time we are apart, I spend each moment praying for our next moment together, for when we are in each other's company, the world shines brighter, and the future looks more wonderful than I could ever have imagined. You have surprised me, Mr. Darcy. I never truly believed that this heart

of mine would find such solace in one as steadfast and kind as yours, until you approached me that morning at Oakham Mount. I believe that the mutual accord that we seek has been found, do you not agree?

I must close, but first, a rather cryptic message that your sister asked me to include. Georgiana bids me to tell you that your cousin says that your oldest friend is present, perhaps here, or perhaps there in Chichester, and that you must be careful, and return as soon as you can.

Do return as quickly as you may. I cannot sleep since you left.

E

CHAPTER 37



Versailles -1774

“*JEAN-FRÉDÉRIC PHÉLYPEAUX, COUNT OF MAUREPAS,*” the page announced the King’s advisor to his private chambers.

Louis XVI allowed his hand to be kissed, and when Maurepas rose, asked in French, “*Where is the harlot?*”

“*Banished, sir.*” answered Maurepas. “*She retires to the convent in Meaux.*”

“*And the charlatan?*” demanded Louis XV.

“*I was shocked, but they took him. He is in your dungeon, here,*” answered the advisor.

“*I want him interrogated,*” commanded the King. “*I have known since my boyhood that he used some enchantment on my grandfather to obtain his place here at court, and now I will know why! You will interrogate him thoroughly.*”

“*It will be as you say,*” promised Maurepas.

* * *

IN A DARK PRISON cell deep beneath the palace, water trickled down the stone walls from the dampness. A rat scurried from one corner to another, then burrowed under the straw upon the floor.

The *Comte St Germain* entertained three prison guards in this cell, behaving no differently than he might in a glittering drawing room. He regaled the men with tales of his travels,

and the wonders of the world that he had seen. At this moment, he made them all howl with laughter at his description of the most astounding set of breasts he had ever encountered, on the person of a young maid in mediaeval Vienna.

The men roared with laughter, passing a flask of spirits around, and the *comte* pretended to drink when they offered it to him. Suddenly a shadow appeared at the door, and the new King's advisor cast them all a glare as he entered. The guards sheepishly left the cell, and Maurepas closed and locked it, taking the only key with him.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Maurepas made his way to the cell, followed by the palace torturer, and two French noblemen who would serve as witnesses to everything the *Comte St Germain* would say under interrogation.

Maurepas turned the key, and the heavy oak door swung open, to reveal a completely empty cell.

*"I believe that he **allowed** us to catch him, do you not?"* said one of the noblemen. *"I think he came just for the amusement."*

CHAPTER 38



The morning after Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley left for Chichester, Uncle Gardiner arrived from London in search of them.

“I am glad they are already on their way, Lizzy,” her uncle confided in Lady Catherine’s drawing room in the company of the occupants of the house and all of their callers. “I shall be glad of some refreshment, and I will follow them directly.”

“I am grateful to have an introduction, Mr Gardiner,” said Mr Woodhouse as he drew near to them with Miss Woodhouse on his arm. “The younger men have told me of several interesting investments that they have entered into with you. Might I request that you send some information to my friend, Mr Knightley? I may myself be interested.”

“I certainly shall, Mr Woodhouse. I know Mr George Knightley well, if that is the man you mean,” answered Edward Gardiner politely. “He speaks of his home in Highbury frequently. Do you visit London very often?”

“We go but rarely, sir,” answered Miss Woodhouse for her father. “My father dislikes the discomforts of the city. I hear from your nieces that you live in Cheapside? I must admit, I have never had occasion to visit the neighbourhood. How curious it must be to live in such a bustling area. Cheapside must be very different from the quiet refinement of the country, but I imagine it has its own... unique charms.”

Elizabeth steamed in indignation for her uncle, and even saw a look of irritation cross Jane’s usually placid visage.

Before she could open her mouth to give Miss Woodhouse a set down, the young lady spoke again.

“You must be so proud of Miss Elizabeth’s marriage prospects, Mr Gardiner. For your niece to put you into the sphere of someone of Mr Darcy’s standing is quite an achievement, especially for a family with such a varied... background. You must consider it a relief that the gentleman seems so determinedly blind to certain... lesser connections.”

“It is obvious that I have neglected your social education appallingly if you do not know that a man like Mr Gardiner is in regular company with a great many landed gentlemen and even noblemen, Emma,” said her father in disapproval of her rudeness.

Mr Gardiner elegantly ignored Miss Woodhouse as he promised to send some information to Mr Knightley. Mr Woodhouse took his leave of them and Lady Catherine, and the pair departed.

A short while later, Elizabeth and her sisters were taking their leave of their uncle in front of Bourne House, when he said to her, “Of course, I will say nothing to anyone in town, it is not my business, but there are a number of men there who would be very interested in knowing the location of Sir Albert and Lord Lennox just now.”

“What of them, Uncle?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

“It is said that Swinton has finally gambled it all away. He will have to sell his country estate or face Newgate. Indeed Sir Albert is so heavily in debt that he fled the city some weeks ago, the bailiffs have been searching for him, and Lord Lennox disappeared from the capital under similar circumstances around the same time,” her uncle answered. “Lennox is not to lose his estate, but he is heavily encumbered, nonetheless. He will have to sell something eventually to pay his debts, or marry a dowry. I would not mention it in company if I were you, it would be incredibly indelicate, but Mr Darcy’s cousins and aunt should be aware of it if they are courting the young ladies.”

“The ladies ignore them mostly. No one takes them seriously,” replied Elizabeth. “I will pass the information along to Lady Catherine, all the same.”

“The sooner the men can return to keep an eye on those young bucks, the better,” grumbled her uncle as he boarded his carriage, and departed for Chichester.

* * *

LATER THAT MORNING, the *comte* was making his way through the house. None ever knew how the man entered and exited for his appointments with Lady Catherine, he came and went as mysteriously as a fog. There was a terrible noise from the music room, a pedantic pounding upon the keys of the pianoforte, as a measure was played poorly, the same one, over and over, until eventually a cry of despair was heard, followed by a great crash upon the keys. The *comte* looked into the music room, to find Mary Bennet weeping as if her heart would break with her head down upon the keys of the instrument.

“Whatever can be the matter, *mademoiselle*, it cannot be as terrible as all that!” the *comte* drawled languidly as he entered the room.

“Oh! *Monsieur le Comte*, I beg your pardon, I thought I was alone,” apologised Mary Bennet as she wiped her eyes. “You must pay no attention to me, I am hopeless.”

“Why do you pound the keys like you are angry? Your music, it does not flow. The music is meant to rise and fall like the waves of the sea. The notes must rise to the highest pinnacle, then wash down gently upon the listener. Your way is not how Mozart intended it to be played,” said the *comte*.

“How do you know how Mozart intended it to be played?” asked Mary miserably, her head still resting upon her folded arms.

“I knew Mozart well,” the *comte* told her.

“Of course you did. You know *everyone* well,” retorted Mary, with no small amount of sarcasm. “The man who knows everyone, and never dies.”

“Voltaire said something similar to that about me once,” reminisced the *comte* with a wistful smile. “I recall when Mozart was only a child prodigy. Even when he lost hope, in his darkest hours, he never gave up. You should emulate him.”

“Does it look like I have given up?” bit out Mary. “I have never given up, even when every person I love, everyone with the exception of dear William, of course, has told me that I am hopeless, and that I ought to stop trying.”

“They are all idiots then. With the exception of your dear William, of course.” insisted the *comte*. “I like your young man. There is no malice in him. He wishes only to improve himself, and do his best by you and your home and family.”

“He is the best of men,” Mary said, wiping her eyes. “And I only wish the same, to improve myself, to be a good mistress to my home when it comes time, and to improve life for everyone at Longbourn. But I cannot lie, I wish that I could have this one vanity for myself. The knowledge that I am truly proficient at something. My father says I should give up and become proficient at something I am actually good at, but I love the pianoforte! There is nothing that I wish more than to be a truly wonderful player, to give dear William a reason to be proud of me. Is that wicked? For me to wish to distinguish myself in that way? Am I a vain woman?”

“*Mademoiselle*, you are the farthest thing from a vain woman that I have ever met,” the *comte* assured her. “Surely with diligence you will find the proficiency you seek.”

“It is hopeless!” Mary wailed. “Georgiana is the best player I have ever known, and Miss Bingley is nearly as proficient, and they have spent *months* helping me, to no avail. I will never be proficient!”

“Allow me to play it for you, you sit here next to me and close your eyes,” said the *comte*. “Hear the music as Mozart did. No other distractions. Just the music.”

Mary moved aside on the bench to make room for the *comte*, as he joined her, and obediently closed her eyes. As the music began, she was filled with a fresh wave of despair, as she always was when the *comte* demonstrated. This man

played as if he had invented the pianoforte himself. How could she ever play like this? By the end of the piece, Mary Bennet was weeping with emotion, as she often did when the *comte* played for their party.

“I shall never play like that,” Mary said despondently. “I doubt it sounded that well even when Mozart himself played it.”

“Of course you shall,” insisted the *comte*. “And I assure you that when Mozart played, it brought tears even to my eyes, and I forgot how to weep many centuries ago. Now, show me how you read the music. Tell me what you see on the sheet, and explain to me in what manner you determine how it should be played.”

Outside the door, William Bennet arrived as if to enter the music room, but upon finding Mary there, weeping and accepting comfort from the *comte*, he knew not how to interrupt, so instead, he left, and went instead to the library; he said nothing to anyone, but he was troubled.

* * *

RICHARD HAD HIS HANDS FULL. Immediately upon the determination that the ladies of the house knew of whatever plot was being hatched, Colonel Allen had apparently disregarded Huggins’ dismissive attitude, and had set officers in plain attire to follow every lady of the house. It was impossible for Richard to keep tabs on all of them at once, and he was beginning to tire, considering that he was following men about at all hours of the day and night. The ladies seemed to be in no danger. Allen was only watching the ladies because he was certain that they knew something that they did not. He sent word to his aunt and Georgiana through Torrens that *all* of the ladies were now being watched, which did not matter much, because they knew nothing, and met with no one that should raise suspicion, but at least armed with the information, Lady Catherine could be more careful about ensuring that the ladies only left the house together in groups of twos and threes, and only with two or three footmen or grooms attending them. It was important for them not to change their routines overly much. Richard avoided seeking out his young

cousin, in case he were to be observed meeting with her. A new rule was also made that servants must leave the house to do errands in pairs. Marigold Tupper remained isolated in her room, but Georgiana kept the girl busy with sewing for the local poorbox, and with novels.

CHAPTER 39



One afternoon while they were out shopping, Elizabeth and Georgiana, who were accompanied by Mrs Annesley and William Bennet, came upon a young boy, Tom Tyler, who, according to the local ladies, was the eldest son of a squatter family that lived in the cottages near the castle that Elizabeth and Lydia were fond of visiting. The boy was always barefoot in the streets of the little seaside town, not begging for coins, but begging for small work of any kind. Elizabeth and Georgiana always kept an eye out for the lad, and whenever they saw him, paid him to carry a message to someone else from Bourne House, even if they had no message that needed carrying. Elizabeth often paid the boy before she sent him off to carry the notes, and when he arrived, the only thing the note would contain was a message asking Lady Catherine or whomever was at home to pay the boy again once he arrived. In this way, the boy would earn enough to purchase a hot pot to feed his family.

Hot pots were purchased on the street. The working class and the poor would descend upon the butcher each day, but the choicest cuts of meat were always saved for the upper and middle classes. If meat could not be obtained, then it was to be a hot pot for the family meal. The women of the lowest working class could not afford to remain at home once their oldest was old enough to watch the youngest. Some children as young as five or six stayed in their cottages each day watching infants while their parents worked. It was difficult for a mother to come home and cook a meal with little available for ingredients after her long day, so often a working

family brought their pot into the village and had it filled by a street vendor. Families who could afford it, took their pot to town, and purchased a Lancashire hot pot made of mutton, potatoes, leeks, and assorted root vegetables. The poorest families, who could not afford it, took home a pot made of oysters, whatever offal had been available from the butchers that day, and a very small amount of potatoes or other vegetables. Those who could not afford even the meanest hot pot, were obliged to go down to the water, and devour whatever oysters could be pried off the underside of the docks when the tide was low.

On this day, young Tom Tyler had already earned enough for his family's hot pot, and was carefully carrying it home through the street as the young ladies exited the lending library, accompanied by William Bennet, who was also known to the boy. "Afternoon, Miss Bennet, Miss Darcy, sir," the boy nodded as he passed them.

"Good afternoon, Tom. Please come to Bourne House early tomorrow morning, I will have a letter that I shall wish to send to the post office," Elizabeth said in answer to the boy. Georgiana had encouraged Torrens to use the boy for household errands instead of sending out the servants whenever possible since the truth of the trouble with Marigold had been discovered.

"Thankee miss, I be there by breakfast," the boy promised. Suddenly, Lord Lennox came around a corner, and bowled the boy over in the street. Pandemonium ensued as the hot pot turned over, and both the boy and the man were on the ground, covered in the greasy contents of the pot.

"You little bastard!" Lord Lennox cuffed the boy over the ear as he dragged him to his feet. "Have you any notion how expensive this waistcoat was! This is French silk of the likes that cannot be found any more!"

"I'm sorry, yer lordship, you did not see me as you came about!" cried poor Tom.

"Sorry! How dare you blame this on me, you stupid little lobcock! I should call the constable, how would you like to rot

in prison until you have compensated me for my garments!” shouted Lord Lennox, shaking the boy viciously.

“Lord Lennox, your language! There are ladies present!” William Bennet objected strenuously, but he was too slow to give any real remonstrance, for Georgiana Darcy was upon the nobleman with her parasol, beating him about the head and demanding that the man release the boy immediately.

Georgiana Darcy had been raised a true gentlewoman, and was nothing but gentle and generous with the poor. Her example had been set by her brother and father, and by the stories told to her by the housekeeper, tenants, and locals of aid that her mother had provided to others in her lifetime. Whenever possible, Georgiana gave those who needed it the most the opportunity to earn what they needed, allowing them to retain their dignity rather than accept charity. Having heard stories from the locals regarding the circumstances in which the Tylers lived, she was outraged by Lord Lennox’s behaviour.

“Lord Lennox, how dare you behave thus, towards a young boy who did nothing wrong! We were standing here conversing with Tom the entire time, and it was *you* who knocked *him* over! I *demand!*” she pounded him with her parasol with each emphasis. “That you *apologise! At once!*”

Elizabeth and William pulled their young friend away before Lord Lennox lost his temper entirely. “*And* you will compensate Tom for the loss of his family’s dinner, too!” the young girl shrieked.

“I shall do no such thing. You should take care, Miss Darcy, who you assault in the street. Your brother may be as rich as Croesus, but that will not save you when you have attacked a peer,” Lord Lennox said disdainfully. “With one wave of my hand I can have you all locked up by the magistrate.”

“I highly doubt you will find success locking up the niece of the foreign secretary. Not nearly as much as I might find simply by arranging for the bailiffs from town to find you and your friend,” Elizabeth said evenly, not flinching an inch as

the young earl turned his baleful gaze upon her. "That is why you are hiding here, is it not? To escape your debts?"

"How dare you," the earl drew up in indignation.

"Lord Lennox, perhaps you should only return to Bourne House by invitation of Lady Catherine," Mrs Annesley interrupted. "It is not our place to bar you from the home of our host, but after the events of this afternoon, I cannot imagine that she would welcome your company amongst the young ladies in her care again. Perhaps for everyone involved, we should end this indecorous display at once."

"I believe that Miss Darcy's demand that you compensate Tom for his dinner to be appropriate, Lord Lennox," said William in a quavering voice.

"I would sooner spend my money on horse manure," replied Lennox disdainfully.

"Only if you had any money to spend, which I highly disbelieve. Let us not importune Lord Lennox further. I doubt he can afford to replace the hot pot," said Georgiana snidely as she turned away.

"If you were a man, I would call you out!" said Lord Lennox in anger.

"Lord Lennox! Miss Darcy is not even out in society! To speak towards her in such a manner is ungentlemanly in the extreme!" objected Mrs Annesley.

"If you like, I could write to my cousin in the regulars, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I am certain he would be all too happy to stand for me after your foul behaviour, Lord Lennox," retorted Georgiana. Terrified by the mention of Matlock's second son, who was a legendary shot, and skilled with a sword beyond all reckoning, Lennox gave them a final hateful look, and hurried away.

"Miss Darcy, you should never create such a scene in public!" chastised Mrs Annesley. "It is well that there is not much society in Eastbourne, but your brother will be distressed indeed by your boldness."

“My brother would have beaten Lord Lennox in the street himself if he had witnessed such behaviour towards a poor boy who had done nothing to deserve it,” said Georgiana. “I wish I was a man, then I could have done it.”

Poor Tom was sitting on the ground, shaking. Elizabeth knelt next to him. “All will be well Tom.”

“You don’t understan’ miss,” hiccupped the boy. “My ma, she had a baby yesterday. She be terrible unwell, she says her body is too ill to make milk. I was to spend the money on goat’s milk for the baby, but Mrs Blott, my ma’s friend, she said my ma can’t make milk ‘cause she don’t eat. I bought the pot so ma might get strong, and make milk fer the babe, an’ now I got no pot an’ no milk.”

“William,” Elizabeth said, turning to her cousin.

“I will go and obtain some goat’s milk immediately, Cousin Elizabeth,” her cousin said quickly. He turned to Tom. “Where is your home, that I might meet you all there, Tom?”

“Stepney Lane, sir,” Tom named the location of the squatters village nearby. William went on his mission to find a goat, while the ladies accompanied Tom back to the vendor.

Elizabeth had seen the contents of the pot that had spilled all over Tom and Lord Lennox, and was appalled at how disgusting the greasy concoction looked and smelled. She was not even entirely certain that it was wholesome. Though Tom made to return to the same vendor, Elizabeth guided them all to another further down the street, which served Lancashire Pots. The contents of this man’s stew looked far more nourishing and healthful than the oyster pot.

“Please fill this pot, and I would like to pay you in advance, so young Mr Tyler can return every day for the rest of the month,” Georgiana said to the vendor kindly.

“Oh miss, that be too much!” protested Tom.

“I am certain it is no less than my brother would have done in Lord Lennox’s position, and I will not be said to have done less,” Georgiana insisted. “We will accompany you home, and see what can be done to assist your mother.”

The ladies kindly allowed Tom into their carriage, and were soon at Stepney Lane. These were not proper cottages. These were of rickety, lean to construction, erected from stolen lumber, most of which was so old that it was rotting. The Tyler shack was only one room. There were three filthy beds on the dirt floor, two of which were filled with children, upon the other laid Bella Tyler and her newborn babe. The only other furniture was a crude, handmade table, and two chairs.

Mrs Tyler was weak, feverish, and near death. The babe was so weak and dehydrated that it could barely squeak. Elizabeth sent a footman running for the *comte* and Lady Catherine. The young ladies set to serving the children with the little crockery and cutlery they could find.

William arrived before Lady Catherine did. With him, he carried two bottles of goat's milk, twelve boiled eggs, a loaf of bread, and a glass baby feeder, obtained at Johnson's General Store. Georgiana was feeding the baby when her aunt arrived.

"I heard of your adventure from the footman, niece. I am proud of you for your courage. Lennox will never set foot in *my* drawing room again," said Lady Catherine, looking about herself at the small room they were in. She shook her head at the conditions they observed. "Seven children, all but one under ten," she tutted.

The *comte* examined the woman, and administered an elixir, while Elizabeth and the other ladies did their best to clean what they could in the little lean to. "The elixir should finish off her fever in the night. She will wake tomorrow, though she will be weak. She must eat every day if she is to regain her strength, and make enough milk to feed the babe," he told the women.

"I paid the street vendor to have a hot pot for the family every day for a month," Georgiana said.

"And Mrs Forrester has said that if Tom will come every morning to milk her goat and cow, collect her eggs, and carry some wood, there will be a bottle or two of goat's milk every day for the baby, and a few eggs for the little ones," William added. He had paid Mrs Forrester a little something to make it

worth such a sacrifice of her dairy when she did not need the help, and Miss Pole had promised to give a few eggs a day for the cause as well. The people of the little village liked Tom Tyler, though his parents were not well thought of at all.

The party took their leave, and Tom promised to ensure that the babe was fed, and that his mother would be looked after by himself and his sister, a nine year old girl named Mary.

In the carriage, the party was quiet at first as they contemplated all that they had seen. Eventually Lady Catherine said, "It is so difficult to walk out of that shack and not give all the aid that I would wish to that woman, but it would all be for naught. They are undeserving, and they would act like it."

"Aunt, I am surprised at you!" gasped Georgiana, scandalised.

"I do not mean that they are undeserving due to their position or rank, Niece, I mean that they are undeserving due to their refusal to help themselves, or even allow others to help them," Lady Catherine explained. "Lady Amesbury has spoken of the family to me after noticing that the young man was running errands for our house. His father will not take steady work, though it has been offered by many in the area. He will not work with the fishermen, he will not take work on the docks, or on the farms. He prefers poaching and petty crime, and he is so proud that he forces his family into starvation because he will not allow them to take charity. Nor will he allow his wife or the boy to work enough to sustain them in any decent manner when he is present, which I am told is thankfully not often.

"It is Mr Tyler's responsibility to provide for his family," continued Lady Catherine. "And just because he has no interest in doing so, does not mean he is willing to watch anyone else do it. Job Tyler comes and goes at will, only stays with his family a few days or weeks at a time, perhaps only every few months or so. He turns up as soon as his wife has recovered from childbirth, only to fill her belly again and leave. When any of the local ladies give the family crockery or

blankets, or clothes, he takes them away and disposes of them. They are not allowed to accept anything resembling charity. When the boy does too well with whatever work he can find, the father's pride becomes wounded, and he beats the boy, and breaks or destroys whatever he has earned. The man maintains that they are his family; his wife and children belong to him, and it is his right to starve them if he chuses. There is no law to prevent it, and his wife will not leave him. Every manner of assistance has been offered to Mrs Tyler, and she turns away from it all. This is what makes Tom Tyler's parents undeserving, Niece."

"It is a terrible shame. Poor Tom," Elizabeth said.

"Poor Tom, indeed," Georgiana said thoughtfully as she looked out of the window of the carriage at the passing scenery. *My brother would know how to help Tom Tyler. I must speak with him about it as soon as he returns.*

* * *

THE FAMILY ENJOYED a treat after dinner. Encouraged by Miss Bingley, who had been listening with delight to Mary's lesson all afternoon, Mary performed for them on the piano. It was not Mozart, nor was it a complicated piece. The tune she played was for one of intermediate skill, but Mary played it beautifully, the music rising and falling with feeling and emotion.

Jane and Elizabeth were weeping when Mary finished the piece, not due to the beauty of the playing, but in happiness for their sister, who was glowing with joy as she played. When she had finished, everyone was on their feet clapping and congratulating her. Her betrothed smiled and congratulated her as well, but his smile did not reach his eyes; Mary did not notice.

CHAPTER 40



One afternoon at the Quartermaster General's Headquarters, Colonel Sanford entered the office of his superior, Brigadier General Spaulding, saluted, and then delivered an unmarked letter.

"Was it the usual messenger?" Spaulding asked.

"Yes sir," answered Colonel Sanford.

"Nothing unusual about the delivery?"

"Nothing, sir," assured the lower ranking officer.

Spaulding dismissed the man and waited for him to close the door before opening the message. He reviewed it briefly, then fed it to the fireplace. This was the second request for assistance that their agent had sent in as many weeks. The agent was very good, Spaulding would give him that. Another fortnight, and he would have the entire plot put together by himself, for all the good it would do him. Spaulding had been waiting for a moment like this for years, and had picked this particular agent especially for this task. The plot would harm the people, there was no doubt about that. Lives would be lost. The militia would lose much to overcome the devastation that was coming to Eastbourne, though Spaulding did not truly believe in his heart that the plot would prevail. The plot did not need to prevail. It was not about the plot. This was about revenge.

Spaulding had spent years seeking revenge, and had taken it already several times over. There was only one man left now that must lose everything, as Spaulding had lost everything. As

long as the agent was killed, and the necessary evidence to implicate *him* in the plot was left with him, then Spaulding would consider the endeavour worthwhile.

There were two other loose ends to tie up. The target's other two brats. The target himself had been attacked, but Spaulding was glad the attempt had failed. He wanted his target to live long enough to see his family tree come crashing down about him. He only had to wait until the other two targets were in place, and he would make his move.

* * *

EVERY DAY after meeting Tom Tyler in the street, Georgiana and one or two of the other young ladies, often Elizabeth or Mary, visited the Tyler shack. Mrs Tyler was incredibly weak, and was unable to protest. Though they knew that if Mr Tyler returned home, anything they gave the little family would be taken away, they still brought gowns and blankets for the babe, linens for his nappies, and whatever else they could think of. They brought soft bread, cheese, and cold chicken or ham each day for the children, and Elizabeth helped young Tom find two spaces, one inside the shack, and one outside, where they could hide small items from his father if there was time to do so, when he came home.

Job Tyler did come home, and thankfully Tom had seen him entering the pub with some men before he returned to Stepney Lane. Tom sped to their little shack with all haste, took the blankets and nicer clothes from the children, and ran down the lane to hide them in Mrs Blott's shack. The elderly lady had benefited from a small bowl of the family's hot pot every day, and was all too willing to hide the items from Job Tyler. Tom's mother Bella was completely cowed by her husband, and did not approve of her son's sneaking about and deception, but she kept silent.

Tom also arranged to suspend the hot pots until his father left the area. Job was never home for more than a couple of weeks, but he did not like to starve, and so he would likely provide something towards the family's meals while he was there, even if it was not much. Tom felt that the goat's milk for the baby was most important, and his father was less likely to

object to such a small thing earned by something as insignificant as milking a goat and a cow. If he were to bring the hot pot home every day, his father would get angry, for he would never provide something so generous for his family daily, and often felt on such occasions that Tom was getting too big for his britches, and trying to show his father up. He had been turned out for three whole weeks the last time his father had lost his temper, and had slept in the hedgerows until Job left the area again. If his father did allow the pots into the house, he would most likely eat most of them, and leave little for Bella and the children. Perhaps his father would buy them little enough to eat while he was present, but either way, it made no sense to waste the hot pots when Job Tyler was in residence.

The day his father arrived was Tom's twelfth birthday, and there was a package on the table wrapped in dingy, wrinkled brown paper when Tom returned from sending his sister Mary to Bourne House to warn the ladies not to visit until his father had gone away again.

"Happy Birthday, my boy!" his father shouted as he entered. Tom cringed a bit at the unexpected volume of his mother and siblings cheering. Tom hadn't even realised it was his birthday. The Tylers rarely acknowledged such events. Tom had actually forgotten the date of his birth.

"Thank you, Da!" Tom exclaimed, hugging his father. He loved his father, but Job Tyler must be managed carefully. Tom must maintain the correct gratitude, respect, and deference that his father expected, or it would all go downhill. And once his father was angry, he would drink and grumble for weeks before he up and left again. It was better to keep him in a very good mood for as long as possible.

Tom could only hope that his mother would not be expecting again when his father went away. He was old enough to understand how such things happened, and he was here more often than his father to see how constant pregnancy and childbirth weakened Bella Tyler without sufficient food. Her last delivery had nearly finished her off. Perhaps this time would be different. His mother was still pale, wan, and weak;

she barely left her bed. The baby still relied upon the goat's milk, for Bella could not produce much. Now with his father home, it would take even longer for her to recover, for she would get far less to eat.

Inside the parcel was a pair of boots. They were used, but not terribly so, and they were too large, but what was important was that they were real leather boots, not the kind with flimsy soles that wore out quickly. "I won 'em off a feller in a card game. You'll fill them out in a year, boy, I promise you!" his father had told him. They felt cumbersome, he would have to learn to walk in them without looking like a fool, but he was actually grateful to his father for the first time in his life. A pair of real boots made him a young man. He could go out in search of proper work. The working men in the fields did not even have boots of this quality.

"You've done well, while I've been gone, son," his father said over his pipe. "Twas clever of you to arrange the milk for the baby. Milking the cow for Mrs Forrester, are you? How'd you get the feeder?"

Tom panicked for a moment. He hadn't hidden the infant feeder. "I carried and stacked some firewood for Miss Pole," he said. "The feeder was used, she had a visitor left one behind when it warn't needed no more. Sometimes if she needs firewood carried, she gives a few eggs fer the little'uns." It would not do not to admit that he had industriously done his best, his father was not an idiot. Only stupidly proud and mean.

"Sharp lad; next year, you'll 'ave grown near a foot, I expect. You'll be big eno' to go out on the road wi' me," his father said companionably.

Tom was confused. "I thought I'd go find work on the farms," he said.

"There ain't no future in that, boy," his father said, shaking his head. "That how you wanna spend your life? Nine shillings a week, until you're too old to enjoy what's left of it? You'll come out wi' me an' the lads. See a bit o' the world."

"Who'll help mum?" Tom objected.

His father's face turned hard. "Never you mind. My wife, my concern, boy."

CHAPTER 41



About a week and a half after Darcy left, there was a letter from Derbyshire, announcing that Mrs Tupper had married the Widower Gordon, who had left the lease of his farm to his eldest son who had recently married, and joined her in her cottage, accepting a position from Lord Matlock as a gamekeeper. Marigold was comforted to know that her mother had a husband to protect her now, a formidable one, for Mr Gordon was a large man, and fearsome when provoked. The couple had left for their wedding trip, a four week journey to the highlands, to help the gamekeepers there manage an issue on Lord Matlock's Scottish estate.

Georgiana heard little from Richard. When Lord Lennox ceased calling, the visits of Sir Albert slowed, for the two men were usually in each other's company. Sir Albert acted oddly when in the company of the younger ladies of Bourne House, and asked all manner of odd little questions now, which Georgiana rightly understood to be attempts to make one of them trip up and admit to a knowledge of whatever plot was being hatched in Eastbourne. Georgiana understood that she and all of the ladies were being watched now, and therefore it was unsafe for Richard to approach her often, but she knew he was watching as much as he was able.

Richard was following Huggins and all of his agents in their turn, as well as Colonel Allen and the particular officers that the man used to follow his family. He was hoping against hope that one of them would lead them to Wickham, but so far he had no luck finding the man's location. Richard suspected Wickham to still be in Chichester, stirring up trouble for the

mills there. He only hoped that Wickham did not find some way to harm Darcy.

Wickham *had been* in Chichester, but returned to Eastbourne when he had done as much as he was able there. The situation in Chichester would turn extremely volatile in short order, and Wickham had no intention of being close enough to be fingered as the ringleader when it all came to a head. Richard learned of the return of his and Darcy's nemesis by listening to a conversation between Huggins and Colonel Allen. Then he made it his business to follow Huggins exclusively until such measures bore fruit, knowing that Huggins would meet with Wickham again sooner or later.

After a third message sent to London requesting assistance, Richard finally sent two other messages. One to Darcy House, asking that several footmen and grooms who were very familiar with Wickham be sent to Bourne House. He did not meet with them when he arrived, but Torrens did. Torrens explained to each of them that the ladies in the house were being watched by Wickham and possibly some of his friends, and that they must be protected at all costs. There were armed men who watched the house at night, and others who watched it during the day, taking notes of the others who turned up to watch from Huggins and Colonel Allen. Darcy's men from their London house also accompanied the ladies everywhere. After the behaviour of Lord Lennox on the street, Lady Catherine could easily blame him and the absence of her nephews for the heightened security.

* * *

THE *COMTE* now came every day to Bourne House, both to see Lady Catherine, who looked much better and stronger every day, and also to assist Mary with her piano practice. Before, she had spent her days with William, discussing sermons, scripture, and estate management, or possibly with her sisters or the other ladies. Now she spent every moment at the piano, and the *comte* had been so generous as to spend several hours with her each day. He joined the family at dinner whenever they dined at home, though he still never ate or drank anything but mineral water.

William was now at loose ends, and had nothing to do but practise cricket with some of the local men, or wait upon Lady Catherine, and as he did, he wondered how he had stood it before, even now that her ladyship's address was so much improved. He dearly wished that the other gentlemen would return, so that he might have a wider society. Every time he went looking for his betrothed, she was in the music room, laughing, and even singing! The *comte* seemed to be a superb teacher of everything, and quickly showed Mary all that she was doing wrong musically, helping her learn what tones sounded best with her voice, and what notes to avoid, considering her vocal weaknesses.

Every evening, Mary played for their party after dinner, and every one clapped and exclaimed, and gave their congratulations, even Miss Woodhouse, who, as a rule, disapproved of the Bennet sisters entirely, due to their uncles in trade. William did his best to seem happy for his betrothed, and he was certain that he *was* happy for her, very happy indeed. But she played all day and half the night now, she barely had a word for him any longer. She and the *comte* spent a great deal of time in each other's company, and the man must be very funny, for Mary laughed a great deal when in conversation with him.

One morning, another clergyman accompanied Mr Woodhouse and his daughter on their call to Bourne House. "Mr Elton and I know each other well!" cried William, standing to shake his old schoolmate's hand once the introductions had been made. William Collins had not had any close friends at school, his demeanour had prevented it, but he had run into a clergyman that he knew from his Oxford days while visiting London with his cousins and the other gentlemen. The man had wasted no time writing to the other men in their year, to inform them that *Collins* of all men, had not only improved himself greatly, but had obtained *two* valuable livings, was engaged to a very pretty girl, and now had some excellent connections. Shortly after, he had received letters from many clergymen he had known in school, congratulating him on his good fortune, and he had commenced correspondence with several of them. Elton had

not been one of them, but William was happy to see him nonetheless.

“I heard that you had reverted to an old family name, Bennet. How have you been since Oxford?” said Mr Elton, smiling. “And I heard that you are betrothed as well – it was in my last letter from John Kershaw. Is your lady here?”

“She is in the house, but you find her at her music practice,” answered William. “Perhaps she will join us presently.”

“Miss Elizabeth, this is our friend, Mr Elton, to whom I recently mentioned wishing to introduce to you,” said Miss Woodhouse.

“How nice,” Elizabeth said, not wishing to encourage Miss Woodhouse or Mr Elton.

“Miss Woodhouse wrote to me that the company hereabouts is very congenial,” said Mr Elton. “I can see just from the company in this room that society here must be delightful.”

“A little less varied than one might expect at a seaside resort, or even in the countryside, but no less delightful,” replied Elizabeth. “If one is truly here for their health, then the limited company must be more restful, I believe.”

“Less varied, not at all! We dine with ten families of all shapes and sizes in Highbury!” declared Miss Woodhouse. Elizabeth did her very best not to laugh at this openly, and instead dipped into a curtsy and moved across the room to join Jane and Priscilla.

William remained to speak with Mr Elton. Miss Woodhouse learnt that she would quickly be paid out for her meddling, for Mr Elton would not be pried from her side to pay court to Elizabeth. Eventually, out of irritation that he would not be parted from her, even when he was conversing with another, Emma Woodhouse swooned in distress, and had to be carried home.

* * *

DARCY RODE his horse alone into the market street in Eastbourne. He and Charles had not taken their carriages into Chichester, instead leaving them to the multitude of ladies at Bourne House. Darcy had also left his valet behind because he was still ill, instructing the man to remain, and that if he became well enough, to do what he could to help Torrens see to the security of the house. It had taken a few days, but the disquiet had cooled in Chichester. Their mills had barely even been involved, though the Darcy and the others had stayed and done their best to assist those whose mills *were* affected, for when the whole town went up in a rage, all mills would be destroyed by the mob. The other mills were not among the worst of those who abused their labourers, but they could be improved.

Mr Gardiner and Charles had agreed that they would stay behind and show the other men what improvements they had made to the mills they purchased the year before, and how those investments improved not only the health of the workers, but also the profits of the mills, allowing them to offer higher wages without feeling the pinch. Mr Bingley and Mr Gardiner also agreed that Darcy should return to Eastbourne immediately, considering his concerns, which he had shared with them after receiving Elizabeth's letter with Richard and Georgiana's warning in it. He was baffled as to the suggestion that Wickham might be in Chichester, what complicated mess had his cousin and sister uncovered?

Darcy left his horse at the livery, and headed towards the confectioner's where he intended to purchase sweets for Elizabeth, Georgiana, and his aunt. He also carried a book of Wordsworth in his pocket, procured for Elizabeth from Chichester. He planned to propose before Lady Amesbury's ball, which was to be in a week and a half, just a few days after the cricket match. He and Bingley had both obtained Mr Bennet's approval for their engagements in advance of their visit to Eastbourne, so they could announce their engagement at the ball, if Elizabeth wished it, and if Lady Amesbury agreed.

Just before he entered the shop, a flash caught the corner of his eye, and he turned in time to see George Wickham turn

down an alley. Determined to collar his old enemy, he followed, first up one alley, then into another, into the mews behind houses, down lanes alongside shops, until he was quite turned around. He paused at the back of an alley, Who was that man, waiting? Was that Lord Amesbury's son, Lord Bexley? Suddenly there was a noise behind him. Before he could turn, he was coshed on the back of his head, and all went black.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER, Bingley rode up to Bourne House on his horse. He was beaming to see Jane as he was announced to Lady Catherine's drawing room, and was greeted by the ladies and their guests.

"Hullo, everyone! I am ever so glad to be back well in time for the cricket match! Hullo Caroline! Where is Darcy? Is he off practising with William?"

"William is visiting his friend Mr Elton," Elizabeth said, her eyes wide. "Ought Mr Darcy not be with you?"

"By jove, he came two days ahead of me!" exclaimed Bingley. "Your Uncle Gardiner intends to follow in a few more days, he is conducting some more business in Chichester, but Darcy should already have arrived!"

"What do you mean, Darcy came ahead of you?" said Lady Catherine sharply, rising to her feet in concern. "Are you certain he did not go to London first?"

"Yes indeed, for Darcy was concerned about a particular matter here, and wished to return with all urgency. Gardiner and I agreed, and encouraged him to make haste; I am very certain of it," answered Bingley.

"What could have happened to delay him?" cried Georgiana.

"And why would you not have come across him on your journey?" added Priscilla.

"I ought to have seen him, for I took the same roads that we travelled there by, and stopped at the same inns the entire

way,” said Bingley.

“What can be done?” asked Elizabeth in fear. What could have happened to Fitzwilliam? She was certain that he would have returned to her and Georgiana at all speed, considering the tone of the last letter they had sent him.

“Bingley, you must go back out immediately, and find him,” said Lady Catherine, with a touch of her old imperiousness.

Bingley barely noticed any rudeness, if her ladyship’s demand could be described as such. Bingley was every bit as concerned about his friend. “Perhaps I ought to ask questions in the market town first, and leave in the morning. I should hate to go straight back to the road and miss him if he is here somewhere.”

“We have Bennet here, and I can ask Mr Woodhouse, and the *comte*, and even the mayor to ask questions here, Bingley,” Lady Catherine insisted. “You must go, immediately. If we find anything, we shall send a message behind you.”

Bingley was not at all unwilling to agree, and so after a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches, he took a parcel of food and a bottle of cider from the kitchens, stowed it in his saddlebag, and after a moment tender goodbyes with Jane, he was on the road again.

CHAPTER 42



Paris - 1793

IN A ROOM IN PARIS, screams and angry shouts could be heard outside the door. “*Jeanne! They are coming!*” A lovely woman wearing the gown of a lady in waiting said in French as she entered the room.

“*I cannot believe it has come to this,*” said Jeanne du Barry. “*Why would they arrest me, only for helping to save the lives of others? I have done nothing!*”

“*You must hide!*” said her lady in waiting. The two women looked strangely alike, their colouring and the shape of their face making their similarity uncanny. Madeleine Auclair¹ was Jeanne du Barry’s illegitimate half sister, and the two ladies were exceptionally close.

Madeleine pulled Jeanne into a dressing room, dragged the dressing table and the rug from a trap door, and opened it.

“*I cannot, they will take you in my place, I know it!*” Jeanne cried.

“*You must, or they will kill you!*” Madeleine insisted. There was a pounding from the outer door, as Madeleine pushed her half sister down the hole, and uttered the last words Jeanne would ever hear her speak, “*You will be safe.*”

Suddenly the trap door closed, and Jeanne could hear the dressing table being dragged over it again. She cried out and pounded upon it , until a strange green light came from a

curious jewel a few feet away. She saw a man hiding in the passage she occupied, and as he approached her, she recognised him. *“It is you,”* Jeanne said. *“You must help me! We must save Madeleine!”*

The stomping of boots and angry shouts of men were heard above, drowning out her tears, as the apartment was invaded and the men arrested Madeleine. The *Comte St Germain* shook his head, putting his finger to his lips. The pair waited silently until the pounding boots disappeared into the distance as Madeleine was dragged from the apartment.

“How could you!” she turned on the *comte*. *“How could you let them take her!”*

“It was requested that I save you, and so I shall. For the memory of our dear friend. We cannot save her. You must come, or it will be for nothing.”

Jeanne followed St Germain through a series of tunnels, grieving for her sister, and all the others that had been lost to the guillotine.

1 Madeleine Auclair is a fictional character created for the purposes of this story.

CHAPTER 43



When William arrived home to learn of the missing Mr Darcy, he went directly back out to question the proprietors of the market village, to learn if Darcy had been seen in the last few days. He only managed to question a few before it became too late to continue, and he returned to Bourne House. The following morning, Elizabeth and Georgiana went out with him. Darcy's valet Mr Winston, only just recovered from his illness, insisted on joining the search. Over the course of the day, they canvassed nearly the entire village, and no one could recall seeing Mr Darcy since he had left with Mr Bingley. There were only a few establishments they did not visit. The barber was one, the livery where Darcy might have stabled his horse was another, and also the modiste, though they did not expect *she* would have seen him.

These businesses were closed, for the fever that Mr Winston had suffered *was* contagious. Two housemaids and a footman had fallen down with it at Bourne House since Mr Winston had taken ill, and several houses and businesses around Eastbourne had closed their doors or taken down their knockers due to illness. The group returned to Bourne House, tired, hungry, and dejected, at the end of the day.

“I shall go back out tomorrow to see if the Shaw family is improving enough to be disturbed,” said William, referring to the household of Mr Shaw, who owned the livery. “If Darcy has been in Eastbourne's market village at all, Mr Shaw will have seen him first.”

“Mr Bennet is correct,” pointed out Priscilla. “Darcy is not in the habit of leaving his horses unattended in front of establishments, he nearly always prefers the security of the livery,”

“I agree,” said Lady Catherine. “We must speak to Mr Shaw or his sons. If they have not seen Darcy, then it will be obvious that he never made it to Eastbourne.”

“I am still of the hope that there is some explanation,” insisted Jane. “Perhaps Mr Darcy’s horse threw a shoe, or perhaps he stopped to help someone in need, we all know how generous he is. Or perhaps he took a wrong turn, and will arrive tomorrow after losing his way.”

“I think we can all agree that Mr Darcy is unlikely to have lost his way, but like Jane, I too hope that he will arrive tomorrow with some reasonable explanation,” said Caroline Bingley, who still struggled with the idea of Darcy’s fallibility, though she had at least accepted that he was not for her, and no longer made her company feel awkward about it.

“I must have a distraction, else I shall go mad. Miss Mary, will you play for us?” said Lady Catherine. “What have you and the *comte* been practising?”

“I have been practising *Ombra mai fu* by Handel, your ladyship,” answered Mary. “I will be happy to play for you.” Mary rose and went to the instrument. She waited to see if her betrothed would come to turn the pages for her, but he was studiously looking away. She sighed. Before she recently began to truly improve, he would sit with her at the instrument and she would nod when the page needed turning, but it seemed that since Mary had improved her skill, somehow her future husband seemed less interested in her playing. Indeed, she felt as if William barely spoke to her at all since they came to Eastbourne. She almost preferred being back in Meryton, where their efforts towards their shared future was their concern, and they worked together with enthusiasm. After a moment, she gave up on him, and asked Georgiana to turn her pages. She had also been practising singing the English translation of the piece, and her voice lifted up more pleasantly than it had ever done before.

CAN WE WEEP FOR THEE, beloved, where in peace thou reposest?

Ah, never may we deplore thee.

South wind, west wind, breathe upon her!

Let the birds of the valley with music lull her!

But let no sounds of sorrow break through her dreaming.

SLUMBER, dear maid!

Green boughs will cover thee!

Calm airs breath over thee

Where thou art laid.

Slumber, then, peacefully,

O gentle maid!

THE PARTY all clapped and cheered at the end, Jane and Elizabeth both weeping with joy for their sister as usual. Mary looked over to see her betrothed looking sadly out the window, and wondered what she had done wrong.

* * *

DARCY HAD no idea where he was when he awoke. There were men, rough sounding men, speaking in French somewhere distant, but not close by enough to hear what they were saying. To Darcy's ear, it was a very low dialect of French, it was possible that even if they were closer, he might not understand much of what was being said.

There was a sash tied over his eyes, and he was tied to a post with a rough rope. He felt hard, cold stone under him, and could hear waves crashing not too far distant. The stone under him was damp. It sounded and felt as if he were in a cave near the sea. He wondered if Wickham and Lord Bexley were caught up in some smuggling operation. He considered the knowledge of the fact that Wickham had been seen conversing with the man Huggins in French, and the men speaking French nearby, he then hoped that Wickham was not caught up in something more unsavoury.

“Why would you bring him here? You ought to have killed him right there in the alley!” said a rough voice in French.

“I might have done, if Bexley had not been there,” answered Wickham, in the flawless French he had learned from his mother, who had come over as a ladies maid nearly a decade before the Storming of the Bastille. “The man is squeamish. You really ought to have found allies with stronger stomachs.”

“All of you English are squeamish,” growled the other man. “What will you do with him?”

“Nothing for now,” answered Wickham. “I would kill him, but since I was obliged to spirit him here, I might as well hold onto him, in case he becomes useful somehow later.”

“As long as he does not become a problem,” said the other man menacingly.

“There is barely time for him to be a problem, the landing is only just over a week away,” said Wickham easily.

“Do not talk in front of him!” the other man insisted, as the two moved away to continue their conversation.

A landing. Darcy thought. Perhaps it is smuggling, then. He knew now that he had a week, perhaps less, to escape before Wickham found a use for him, or worse, did not, and ultimately killed him. The idea of being bound hand and foot, then murdered by Wickham, while Georgiana and Elizabeth were nearby and possibly in danger brought bile to his throat.

* * *

ELIZABETH AND WILLIAM returned to the livery the following day, bearing an enormous pot of soup the kitchen of Bourne House had sent for the sick family.

“Thankee, miss, this be jus’ what Mrs Shaw and the little uns need,” said the maid. “I only be jus’ out o’ my bed, and the master’s terrible worried about the ‘orses. ‘E not be well enough to tend ‘em.”

“Please tell Mr Shaw that we have Lady Catherine’s grooms and Mr Darcy’s grooms at our disposal, we will send

someone to care for the horses every day until he is well. It will be my first task the moment I return to Bourne House. In fact, before we leave, I shall send Mr Darcy's groom into your stable to ensure none of the horses are in dire need of care. We arrived in his carriage."

"Oh thankee, miss, that be very kind, the master will be ever so relieved," the maid said.

William spoke to Mr Darcy's groom, and the man agreed to check on the horses with alacrity, concerned that the beasts may have suffered for water or food in the last day or two. Elizabeth waited in the carriage while William went to see if the barber had reopened his shop and possibly had seen Mr Darcy before he fell ill. After about a quarter hour, the groom returned, leading a familiar horse.

"This be worrisome, miss," the groom said. "This be the master's horse."

Elizabeth pounded on the door of the Shaw's residence. "I am very sorry to disturb the Shaws while they are ill, but I must ask you to question your master," insisted Elizabeth. "Please tell Mr Shaw that Mr Darcy has been missing for some days, and ask how and when his horse came to be in your stable?"

The pale maid bobbed a curtsy, then closed the door and ran to do as Elizabeth bid. After about five minutes she returned. "The master says Mr Darcy lef' 'is 'orse some four days ago, miss; we think that be right," she informed Elizabeth. "Mr Darcy said he'd not be long, he only had a purchase to make afore going onto Bourne House. But he din't return. The master put the 'orse up fer the night, 'e said 'e woulda sent a message to the house the nex' morning if'n 'e hadn't fallen ill. Mr Shaw don't know what shop the gentleman was 'eading to, miss."

This information was distressing in the extreme to Elizabeth. William returned from the barber, who had not seen Mr Darcy, and when the groom had tied Mr Darcy's horse to the back of the carriage, they returned to Bourne House.

Lady Catherine was in terrible distress when she learned the news of Darcy's horse. A messenger was sent to follow Mr Bingley, though he would reach Chichester before it reached him, at least he and Mr Gardiner would know not to waste time looking for Darcy on the road back. The mayor was sent for, as well as the magistrate, Sir Charles Gordon, and Lord Amesbury. A proper search was organised, and the town was scoured thoroughly, twice, over the course of the next four days. Not a soul other than Mr Shaw could account for seeing Mr Darcy in Eastbourne before he disappeared.

Elizabeth and Georgiana were both so distressed, they nearly took to their beds for the first day, in shock and fear, and sat vigil together in Georgiana's and Priscilla's sitting room. Lady Catherine was tireless, directing people and making demands. An orchid had been placed in Georgiana's window, and a hushed meeting was held that night by Georgiana, Richard, and Lady Catherine in that lady's sitting room.

Richard swore that he knew that the men who were up to something in Eastbourne had a headquarters, but so far, he had not been fortunate enough to follow any of them to it. If he had been sent more men, he would have found it by now. All Richard could say was that Lord Amesbury and his son, along with Mr Albert Swinton and Lord Lennox, were up to something in Eastbourne. Richard thought there was a good chance that it was smuggling, given the reports of the debts of the men in question. He could not at all account for how any of the strange happenings in Eastbourne could have anything to do with Darcy, but he allowed that it was possible that Darcy may have stumbled onto something he should not have, particularly considering that Wickham was involved. An express messenger was sent with all haste to Matlock, requesting that Matlock do something about the quartermaster general's office, and to inform him about Darcy.

Mr Bingley and Uncle Gardiner had returned from Chichester, and were doing everything they could. Mr Gardiner had just left that morning to ask questions on the road to London, not really believing anything would come of it, but feeling that the effort ought to be made.

CHAPTER 44



“*B*rigadier General Spaulding, reporting as ordered, sir!” said the officer as he saluted the senior officer in front of him.

“Take a seat, Spaulding.” The quartermaster general gestured to a chair. “What is the situation in Eastbourne?”

“We have received four messages from the agent, sir. So far, no evidence of anything sinister in the area,” Spaulding answered. “Smuggling there almost certainly is, in the region, it is to be expected in any coastal town, but the agent still has no concrete evidence of even that.”

“Let him keep looking,” the senior officer ordered. “The war office has received several letters from locals in positions of authority. The magistrate, the organiser of the East Sussex Volunteer Corps, and even a letter from the coast guard. They all maintain that the coastal activity in the area is concerning.”

“I am certain that if there is anything to find, our agent will discover it, sir,” Spaulding assured him.

“Dismissed,” the quartermaster general said with a wave as Brigadier General Spaulding jumped to his feet and saluted again.

Spaulding returned to his office. This was all coming together far easier than he expected it to. Matters in Eastbourne were taking care of themselves, the French were due in about a week, and it was all at very little trouble to himself. His only concern now was to do something about the target’s other two brats. One would be killed and fingered as

complicit in the plot when it was enacted. The second would be easy enough to manage – she was out in public quite frequently. It was only the target's eldest and his family that would be difficult.

It will be over soon, Marguerite, he promised. The last one. Then I shall join you.

Spaulding was tired. He had spent years hunting and killing the men who had murdered his war bride. He had met Marguerite during the war, when he was a captain on the continent. Marguerite had joined the women following the soldiers not because she was a whore, but because she had lost everything. She was the daughter of a French nobleman who had lost his head, and she had been abused by the French soldiers. She had attached herself to him when he became separated from his regiment, and she hid him from the French soldiers and fed him for three days. He took her back to his tent, and had spent the following months fighting with the other men, in his attempt to prevent her from being used as a typical camp follower.

We were to be married when we returned home, he thought sadly as he recalled the day he returned from a two day drill exercise to find that his Colonel had sent for her while he was away. Drunk and randy, the senior officers as a group had used Marguerite, despite her being heavy with his child, causing her to lose the child and haemorrhage to death. He was thrown into lock-up for his response to the murder of the woman he loved. The men involved were never disciplined. Women were often so used by both sides of the army, the French and the English. The Colonel of his new regiment when he was transferred told him sadly that he did not agree with it, but the top man at the war office had put an end to the matter, saying that it would look bad back home, at a time when the country's and army's morale was never more important, if the officers were disciplined. Other officers told him to be grateful, that Marguerite was probably not even carrying his child, and that he had been done a favour. Marguerite had been doubly judged by the British soldiers and the women who followed them because she had played the traitor to her own country by helping him. The soldiers considered her dishonourable, the

female camp followers considered her the worst of women. They only followed the camp and serviced the men to earn enough to eat. Marguerite had actually hidden an English officer from her own side's army.

Spaulding had found ways to pick the men who had hurt Marguerite all off slowly, one by one. Carriage accidents were all too common. One poor man had fallen off a cliff. Another had been knifed while being robbed in London. Three had obliged him by dying in battle. Only the man who had made the final decision was left. Spaulding would ensure this man did not die. He would, instead, like Spaulding himself, lose everything. The man, who was now foreign secretary, would see the end of his line, and live with the pain, as Spaulding had done.

* * *

THE CRICKET MATCH WAS CANCELLED. The tradesmen sent an emissary to the mayor, informing him that they wished to cancel the match until Mr Darcy was found. Lady Catherine was touched by the town's consideration, though the gentlemen of the house would not play while they were searching for their friend, and so the gentlemen's team was sadly diminished anyway.

The house ceased all social engagements. Some of the ladies still accepted morning callers while they waited for news. None of the ladies of the house returned calls, and society understood. The household dined alone each evening. The *comte* still came daily to administer elixirs to Lady Catherine, and work with Mary at the pianoforte. Lady Catherine, Elizabeth, and Georgiana met daily with the mayor and the magistrate. Late every night, Lady Catherine and Georgiana met with Richard, who visited them by stealth to discuss what they knew.

None were aware of it, but at night, Lady Catherine had ceased sleeping. She spent her nights on her knees by her bed, praying for hours for the life of her nephew, the only living son of her beloved sister. She began to look drawn and pale again, she was once again neglecting her meals, and despite

the *comte's* elixirs, the disease that was killing her began to sap her strength afresh.

The day of the cancelled cricket match, Lady Catherine was overcome after a discussion with the mayor. "Lady Catherine, are you well?" asked Elizabeth in concern to see her host swaying on her feet in the hall. Elizabeth motioned to Torrens, who moved closer, and caught Lady Catherine as she collapsed.

Later, Elizabeth and Anne sat by Lady Catherine's bedside as the *comte* examined her. She woke during the examination. "*Mon trésor*, you have undone all of our good work," he said, patting her hand, which he held in his own.

"I think the time has come for you to admit that your elixirs do not work, and encourage my mother to seek *real care*, before you end up killing her, do not you agree, *comte*?" Anne demanded.

"Anne, you may leave us. I would prefer it if you mind your own business," said her mother.

"Lady Catherine, I must object," interrupted Elizabeth. "I must point out that you asked me, your nieces, and my sister to accompany you here while you sought a cure. Now you expect us, and your poor daughter, to go without comment or question for weeks on end, meanwhile knowing nothing of your plans or what to expect in terms of your health. You must see how unkind this is to Anne, and how inconsiderate it is of those who travelled here with you in concern for your condition."

Lady Catherine looked to the *comte*. "It was never my advice to keep your loved ones in the dark, *mon trésor*," he said gently.

"I would not, if Anne did not keep coddling me!" Lady Catherine objected. The *comte* raised his brow at her. She sighed and said to Anne and Elizabeth, "The elixirs are to restore my strength, not to cure me."

"I *knew* those elixirs were not a cure!" Anne exclaimed.

"It is a cure for some things," the *comte* explained. "There is no cure for *un loup*."

“Then why not have the operation, Mama?” Anne cried in frustration.

“Lady Catherine was not strong enough to survive the operation when she arrived in Eastbourne,” the *comte* explained. “The elixirs have been to rebuild her strength, to make her feel well and restore her appetite, so she will eat, rest, and be stronger before the knife. I am to provide the surgeons with a sedative, so that she may sleep heavily during the operation, and feel nothing.” He looked at Lady Catherine sternly. “You have unmade all of our efforts with your silliness. Your nephew would not wish his disappearance to be the death of you. I must insist that you eat and sleep, even if I must give you a sedative each night.”

“She will, *Comte*. I will make certain of it,” Anne said excitedly. Now that she knew that her mother might still try the physician’s cure, she was all the more determined to see to every aspect of her mother’s health.

“Oh goody,” Lady Catherine said like a petulant child.

“It occurs to me that now you know how Anne felt, being coddled by you, all of those years, your ladyship,” Elizabeth teased.

“Off with you girls, too saucy by half, the pair of you!” Lady Catherine waved them away, a momentary smile ghosting her lips.

“We will go, but I am returning with your meal in a half hour, and you must eat every mouthful!” Anne said as she and Elizabeth made for the door.

The *comte* turned back to Lady Catherine as he prepared to administer the elixir. “I ought to have recruited that girl to oversee your care the minute I walked into the house,” he laughed.

CHAPTER 45



Three days before Lady Amesbury's ball, an enormous carriage and four bearing the Carlisle crest pulled up to Bourne House shortly before noon. Ashley Fitzwilliam, the Viscount Carlisle stepped down and handed out his wife Arabella, followed by their three young sons. Lady Catherine was relieved indeed to see her eldest nephew, and once his boys had been appropriately fussed over by the ladies, they were sent upstairs with their nurse and the housekeeper, to sort out the nursery.

"We apologise for not sending word ahead that we were coming, Aunt," said Ashley easily, as he accepted a cup of tea from his aunt in her drawing room just after being introduced to all of the other guests of the house. "We travelled in such haste that it might have only arrived mere hours before us. We have been practically sleeping and eating all of our meals in the carriage for days, the boys made quite an adventure of it."

"Indeed, and they were so excited to be coming in haste to rescue their cousin Darcy, that we shall be obliged to assign a footman to each of them, otherwise they shall all run off and get themselves into trouble," observed his wife. "Keeping them from rocking the carriage off of its wheels was an education, I assure you."

"They are good boys, Arabella. The finest crop of Fitzwilliams yet," Lady Catherine assured her nephew's wife. "I hope you are prodigiously proud of those boys, Carlisle."

"Oh, prodigiously!" agreed her nephew. "But enough of the boys. We come on behalf of my father and mother, to do

what we can to help find my cousin. Father will not be permitted in a carriage for another fortnight, or so I am told. Such a terrible break, his leg. I have never seen one so messy that did not need to be amputated. He is fortunate that he believes in young doctors, not old ones, that is all I can say. It shall be Mr Harrison or none for me, if I am ever to be injured.”

“Lord Matlock was certainly fortunate that he has a strong constitution,” said Arabella. “The recovery he endured would have aged most men a decade or more. He did not stop his work or his correspondence with the Prince Regent for even a day, despite his extreme discomfort.”

Lady Catherine took over the conversation, explaining all that had been done in the search for Darcy. The entire town had been searched for miles, twice, two lakes had been dredged, and unfortunately, the townspeople were running out of ideas and motivation to keep looking. Only Lady Catherine’s cajoling had kept the search going. “It is well that you are here, Nephew, for you can assist me in convincing the local gentlemen to keep the search moving,” finished Lady Catherine. “I shall send a note to Lady Amesbury, and have her send you an invitation to her ball. You will meet everyone there.”

“You cannot mean to attend the ball with Darcy still missing, can you? I thought the household would abstain from such entertainment,” said Mr Bingley in surprise.

“In a better world, Mr Bingley, I would sit at home and wave my handkerchief in the air, calling for my salts while the men in charge of this town did all that they ought,” Lady Catherine replied. “But sadly, in the world we actually inhabit, I am obliged to go to a ball when I would rather be worrying about my nephew, because I will not let them set Darcy aside, even for a night of frivolity. They can dance. But I will attend, and everyone in this house will attend, and make them look at us. Make them think about poor Darcy. We will all attend the ball, every single one of us, even the girls, and while we are there, we will be persuading every local, every visitor to

Eastbourne, every officer of the militia, to go back out in search of Darcy with renewed vigour the next morning!”

“Hear, hear!” Bingley stood, clapping. “I second the notion. We shall not let them forget about Darcy! We will remind them all night that there are important matters to return to when the dancing has ended! You will stand up for the big three with me, Jane? The first, and the supper, and the last?”

Jane agreed, eyes shining, as Bingley turned to Elizabeth. “And you, Miss Elizabeth, may I be so bold as to ask for the second?”

“I do not wish to spoil anyone’s fun, but I will not dance,” said Elizabeth. “Lady Catherine’s impulse is a good one, and I will attend without complaint in the hopes that we shall remind everyone that our friend is still missing. The rest of you should dance, and mingle, and talk to as many as you can about it. But I hope you will all forgive me if I do not much feel like dancing.”

Lady Catherine insisted that every member of the household must attend, even Georgiana and Lydia, though they would not dance either, even with each other. Elizabeth promised that they would spend much of their evening together with Miss Annesley.

As Mr Bingley and Lord Carlisle secured dances with the ladies of the house, Mary looked over at her betrothed wistfully. He had barely spoken to her since she began her lessons with the *comte*. Would he not ask her to dance? Did he already take for granted that certain dances were his, before they even wed? What was she to say if another gentleman asked her? After several moments of watching William, who avoided her gaze, she rose from her chair and quietly fled the room.

* * *

IT WAS AN EXCEEDINGLY EVENTFUL DAY. Once the Carlises and their children were settled in, Anne and Priscilla took one of their afternoon rides. Two armed grooms from Lady Catherine’s stable accompanied them, following at a distance. Anne and Priscilla rode out into the countryside for a short

drive before heading into the market town. The ladies visited the library and the general store, leaving the phaeton in front of the first establishment under the watch of the grooms

While the ladies were in the library, a few local men invited the grooms into the alley to play dice. Samuel was not particularly tempted, he saved most of his earnings, but Colin thought that if he could win a little money, that perhaps he could purchase his sweetheart a red shawl she had been eyeing at the haberdasher's when they returned to Kent. After a few long minutes, hearing loud cheers coming from the men in the alley, curiosity got the better of Samuel, and he went into the alley to see who was winning.

Emma Woodhouse was at the confectioner's, waiting for her father, who had left her for a few moments to go next door and speak to the mayor about the reputation of a new doctor for her. He had left her in the company of Mr Elton, who was at the counter, speaking to the proprietor about everything and nothing, as Emma enjoyed a cup of tea and a dish of marzipan.

She stared out the window in boredom. She had been excited to come to Eastbourne, happy to go anywhere or do anything, but sitting still and being ill all the time excluded her from most of the activities the other young ladies enjoyed. She had considered suggesting a physician in town to her father, but she suspected that in London, she would be more confined to the house. Perhaps she ought to suggest Bath. Her father would probably consider Bath, and there would be a great deal more society there. Her father would not have her sister and brother in law for society in Bath. He would have to go out and talk to people.

As she gazed out the window of the very busy establishment, Emma observed Anne and Priscilla exit the door of the library, and continue to the shop, which was at the end of the market street, where there were fewer people about. Just before the two ladies reached the shop, a hired carriage pulled up alongside them. Suddenly, Lord Lennox and Sir Albert Swinton stepped out of the carriage, and faster than one could have possibly imagined, forced Lady Priscilla and Anne de Bourgh inside, stepping in after them. The carriage quickly

sped away, the driver whipping the horses with great energy. Emma looked up and down the street through the window, waiting for someone to notice the incident and do something, but the few people near that end of the street seemed to notice nothing.

Emma jumped out of her seat and rushed out of the shop. She ran into the street, shouting, "Help! Kidnap! Kidnap! Help!" As she reached the pavement, there were a few people looking over at her curiously. Having left Mr Elton behind at the confectioner's counter, oblivious to his companion's exit, Emma rushed to Anne's phaeton, which she had watched the ladies leave not a half hour ago, and with a loud, "Ha!" sprung the horses into a gallop, and followed the carriage at great speed.

The men in the alley noticed nothing, so loud was their raucous noise, until Mrs McKenzie's manservant, Simon, called out to them from the street, "Wasn't you two supposed to be watchin' yer mistress's phaeton? Miss Woodhouse jus' up an' stole it."

Samuel and Colin jumped up, Colin pocketing his winnings, and rushed into the street, alarmed to find the phaeton missing. Simon pointed the direction in which Miss Woodhouse had gone, as Samuel and Colin leapt onto their horses and gave chase.

After following the road for perhaps a half mile, Emma spotted the carriage far ahead of her, heading north. After several minutes, Samuel and Colin rode up alongside her, their horses at a full gallop.

"Kidnap! Kidnap!" Emma shouted to them, pointing to the carriage far ahead. Understanding her meaning, Samuel and Colin increased their speed and took off after the hired carriage in alarm. Emma followed, determined to see her friend Lady Priscilla and her cousin safely rescued.

* * *

MR WOODHOUSE RETURNED to the confectioner's, where Mr Elton was still having a nonsensical conversation with the proprietor and his wife about marzipan sculptures. Woodhouse

was puzzled to find his daughter missing from the establishment, her tea and marzipan where he had left *them* but his daughter was not where he had left *her*. He interrupted Mr Elton's conversation, resulting in that man's confusion at Emma's disappearance. They went outside, where Mrs McKenzie's servant Simon was only too happy to inform them that Miss Woodhouse had stolen Miss de Bourgh's phaeton, and was being chased by Miss de Bourgh's grooms.

* * *

BACK ON THE ROAD, the carriage and grooms left Emma's sight after another few minutes when they went around a wide curve. Emma could not recall having travelled this way with her father since coming to Eastbourne. Not knowing what was beyond the curve, Emma slowed. She was unused to driving a phaeton, though she occasionally drove their little trap in Highbury. She would not like to tip Miss de Bourgh's equipage.

Beyond the curve she pulled up sharply to utter chaos. A tree had fallen across the road a short distance beyond the turn, the carriage, not having slowed as Miss Woodhouse did, had crashed into it and overturned. The horses were screaming, and the driver was dead, his head cocked at an unnatural angle. Samuel and Colin were both armed, and before Emma could even step down from the phaeton, they had dismounted and approached the beasts, the men's arms were stretched out before them, they turned their eyes away, and two shots rang out, as the poor horses were put out of their misery.

At the sound of the shots, Miss de Bourgh began screaming in panic from inside the carriage. Emma could not blame her, the poor ladies must be terrified. She rushed to the overturned carriage, and climbed up on its side before the two men had even begun to recover from the shock and distress of having to shoot the horses.

Emma wrenched the door of the carriage open, and immediately was struck in the face by a tree branch that had forced its way into the window on the other side of the carriage as it overturned. Miss de Bourgh was still screaming.

“Miss de Bourgh! Miss de Bourgh, are you hurt?” Emma shouted. “Let me help you out!”

Anne’s hand shot up and grasped Emma’s, and with Emma’s help, the lady pulled herself up and out of the door. She was still in a panic, breathing heavily, and Emma thought it was a wonder she had not swooned.

“Lady Priscilla, are you well?” Emma cried as Anne was helped down by the grooms. It was difficult to see around the tree branch and all of the leaves.

“I am alr-” Priscilla was cut off by Lord Lennox.

“Move damn you! Out of my way, I said move, I must get out!” the man shouted, as he pulled himself up and out of the door, shoving Emma as he did so.

“Well!” Emma exclaimed, kicking the man in the behind with her slippered foot as he attempted to climb down. He fell off of the carriage, and was quickly set upon by Lady Catherine’s grooms who commenced to give him a sound beating. Emma turned back and reached out her arm for Priscilla, and as she pulled the lady out, Emma saw what had upset the occupants of the carriage.

Emma would have thought that the experience itself might have been enough to distress anyone, but when she saw the state of Sir Albert, she understood Anne’s screams. Sir Albert was impaled through the chest by a broken tree branch just slightly thicker than Emma’s wrist. The man was still breathing, though unconscious. Emma had never seen such a terrifying sight in all of her life.

“Emma?” she heard her father’s voice from behind her. She turned and found her father standing behind her with Mr Elton and a few other men from the village, one of whom was running for the doctor and more help. “Are you quite well?” her father asked.

“Indeed, Miss Woodhouse, you *do* look quite well!” exclaimed Priscilla as Mr Woodhouse helped Emma down from the carriage. “How fortunate for my cousin and I that you

seem to have quite recovered your strength! Come and sit here with me and Anne, you must feel quite faint now.”

Priscilla began to fan Emma and Anne in turn, as the men gathered round the carriage and discussed how to get Sir Albert out. Eventually, the doctor arrived, confirmed what they all knew. Sir Albert was not going to survive. Rather than make his last moments any more torturous than necessary, he was given a lethal dose of laudanum, and the men settled in to wait until he expired before they attempted to move him.

Mr Woodhouse herded the ladies into his carriage and returned Anne and Priscilla to Bourne House, with Samuel and Colin leading Anne’s horses and phaeton behind. Lady Catherine was in such a rage that she abandoned the party and went immediately to the stables with Torrens and fired the two grooms on the spot. Then she returned to the house and once she had heard all, embraced Miss Woodhouse in thanks, and herded Anne and Priscilla upstairs for large tumblers of brandy, baths, and to be put into their beds to recover their nerves.

* * *

EMMA WOODHOUSE WAS quiet all the way back to their rented house. When they arrived, Mr Elton excused himself and took himself upstairs to his guest room, but Emma’s father called her to the study. She seated herself on a sofa on the side of the room as he poured her a large brandy and handed it to her. She sniffed it and wrinkled her nose.

“It will help your nerves, dear,” her father said as he took a seat near her on the sofa as she took a large gulp and sputtered. Mr Woodhouse waited patiently as she consumed the brandy, and as the heat of the spirits spread through her, he looked at her speculatively.

“Well, Emma?” he asked.

“Well what?” she said irritably.

“You know what, my dear,” he said gently. “I am not angry with you. I would only like you to explain.”

“It helped you,” she whispered. When he asked her to repeat herself, she shouted, “It helped you! Me, being ill! You cooped yourself up at home, afraid of everything for *years*, but when I became ill, it brought you back! You were so determined to see me well again, and when I became well...”

“You were afraid that I would return to my armchair and my blankets and my fears,” her father finished.

“Yes,” whispered Emma. “So I became ill again, for you. When you began to speak of going away to find a physician, I thought that even feigning illness and being unable to do anything fun was better than nothing, as long as we *went somewhere and did something*. I thought that perhaps if we travelled, you might enjoy meeting people and doing things again.”

“You were right,” her father said. “You were entirely right. I *have* enjoyed going out and seeing people again. It has been unfair of me, keeping you in Highbury, with no one but the same few spinsters for company. You ought to be married. You ought to *dance*.”

“I do not mind, not really,” said Emma tearfully. “It was only that you came alive again in a way I had not seen since I was a small girl; I was afraid that it would not last. I will return to Highbury gladly, if only you will be your old self again, always.”

“The *comte*,” her father said distractedly. When she raised a brow, he continued. “He said that you suffered on behalf of another. When they were well, so would you be. What an insightful man.” He took her hands. “I am well, Emma. Now so must you be. We will go to the ball on Tuesday – may I have the honour of your first dance?”

CHAPTER 46



Later that evening, after the household had gone to bed, Lady Catherine met with Georgiana, Ashley, and Richard in her private sitting room.

“Brother! Father was surprised that it was you they sent out here!” said Ashley, rising to clap his brother on the back. “He told me that he spoke personally with the quartermaster before the mission was assigned, he does not think even the quartermaster himself knows that you are the agent in question. What the devil is going on out here in East Sussex?”

“It appeared to be smuggling, and perhaps it is, but damned if I can work it out without proper support, Ashley,” said his younger brother. “I was told that extra men would be sent out the moment I indicated that they were needed. I have asked my superior four times to send more men, and I have yet to hear a word back, and we had a sound method of communication planned. The damned war office sent me out here and abandoned me. I have been attempting to follow no fewer than ten men by myself for weeks, and ensure the safety of Bourne House.”

“Well I can at least take the worry of Bourne House off of your mind. I brought my own staff to add to my aunt’s men here,” replied the viscount. “Now what about Darcy?”

“I cannot find that he has been involved in any way,” answered Richard. “The only connection to Darcy in all of this is that Wickham is involved. It was Wickham who spooked Father’s horse, and if he could have come close enough to the manor after, his plan was to burn you all in your beds.”

“That damned devil,” growled Ashley. “Remind me again why haven’t you killed him yet?”

“I assure you, brother, the very next time I see him, no matter what the circumstance is, I intend to do it directly. I do not even care if I swing for it by this point.”

“I am certain you can be more stealthy than that, brother, but let us not shock the ladies,” Ashley drawled. “My you have grown up, little cousin. This might be the first adult discussion I have seen you admitted to.” he tweaked Georgiana’s nose affectionately.

“I will not be excluded when my brother is missing!” said Georgiana firmly.

“Nor should you be,” smiled Ashley. “Richard, what else?”

“It is possible that it is smuggling, but if it is, it must be something big, for I have never encountered so much intrigue around a smuggling operation,” said Richard. “That makes the most sense considering the debts of the men who are involved. When you are socialising, you must not doubt for a moment that Lord Amesbury is involved. Even the local colonel. In the absence of support from London, I was not even able to seek the aid of the local regiment, for Colonel Allen has been seen meeting with an agent that I suspect has French connections, and he has no less than ten of his officers following the occupants of this house. I heard with my own ears, the colonel wishing to the agent that he would have preferred it if our father had been removed from office before whatever this is takes place. In addition, just before Darcy went missing, Anne somehow inadvertently said something that made Swinton believe that the ladies here know what they are up to. Then they began watching every occupant in this house, not just Darcy and Aunt Catherine.”

“What about this *comte* fellow?” asked Ashley. “I do not think his appearance here can be a coincidence.”

“He is impossible to follow, he disappears like mist.” Richard shook his head. “I know where he resides, and when he leaves his home openly, it is to do nothing other than innocuous visits about the village. There *have* been a few

times when he left this house, or when he has gone out for an early morning walk, that I have not been able to keep a tail on him, but I have yet to see him in any unsavoury activity.”

“I see what you mean about something big,” said Ashley. “I brought Croucher, as you requested.”

Croucher was a man who worked for Lord Matlock. None in the family knew his origins, or how Lord Matlock had come to find the man, but he could blend into any situation or society, with the right garments. Richard carried himself with too much nobility, and too much military precision to be trusted in the pubs where those who knew about the local smuggling rings congregated. Croucher not only had the ability to fit into any situation, he had the skill of making himself trusted immediately by even the most careful men. He would be sent out the following day to question the local men who would not admit to knowing anything to the authorities.

“I do wonder one thing, though,” Georgiana said in a small voice, then faltered self-consciously.

“What is that, dear?” asked Ashley. “Do not be shy, cousin. If you have thought of something, it could be important.”

“Richard just reminded me of something,” Georgiana said. “Do you recall precisely what it was that Anne said that made Lord Lennox drop his cup?”

Richard narrowed his eyes, and said, “*Why do we need so much protection? Are you expecting an invasion of the French?*”

Ashley matched his brother’s expression. “An invasion?”

Richard shook his head. “Completely improbable, brother. The French are spread so thin, causing trouble with us in America, and it is without doubt that they will shortly invade Russia. They would not attack our soil unless they had a mighty army, and their army is everywhere else.”

“What if that is what the French want us to think?” asked Georgiana. “I was treated to a tour of the Martello Tower with Lizzy, Lydia, and Aunt Catherine by the East Sussex Volunteer

Corps. There is hardly a militia present, only a small regiment, but the tower is barely manned by the officers. They live in their camp. The tower is mostly used by the Volunteer Corps. There is a man who heads them, Mr Buckle. He says they use it as a headquarters for investigating smuggling.”

“*You* have been inside the tower?” Richard asked, feeling all of the irony of obtaining the information he needed about his own army’s tower in this manner. “What is it like?”

“Mostly empty,” said Georgiana. “There are some offices, and storage, and an area they use for meetings. I am certain there were areas they did not show us. But there were not many people, the corps being a volunteer endeavour. I saw only a few soldiers during my visit, but I do not know how typical of a day it was.”

“Do you know if the beacon is still laid at the top?” Richard asked, eagerly.

“It is!” Georgiana answered excitedly. “That was the most interesting part of the tour! Did you know that when the beacons are lit, they can be seen by another tower miles down the coast in both directions? If an invasion were to occur, and the beacon was lit, they would light all of the beacons for miles and miles, informing the entire southern coast in minutes! The view out over the sea was spectacular!”

“Do you think that an invasion is likely, with so many officers of the regiment involved, Brother?” asked Ashley.

“It is entirely probable that the officers in question have no idea why they are following the occupants of this house,” admitted Richard. “Senior officers do not have a habit of explaining themselves to their men. Men are given orders, and orders are followed without question. And there are a great many officers who would turn a blind eye to smuggling, particularly if their colonel seemed inclined to. Officers are usually younger brothers, often out of pocket, more in tune with the common man, and many would feel sympathy with Englishmen feeding their families by such measures, particularly those who hail from these southern coastal towns.”

“What shall you do?” demanded his aunt.

“I sent word to my own general days ago,” said Richard. “He was instructed by headquarters to relieve me of duty so that I might leave my regiment and take on this task. But the agreed upon channels of communication have proven to be inconsistent. General Vane will hopefully send a unit of dragoons to take up camp somewhere close by if I need them, and to help with following the agents, I am certain of it.

“I will also send word to a naval friend I have, who is docked in Brighton with his vessel, along with at least several others, whom I also know well. I am going to send a rider to him, asking him to have his friends come and hide in the nearby waters. For a short while at least, until we know more. French frigates are smaller, and carry perhaps half as many men as Wentworth’s third rate. If there were enemies in the waters, a few of our vessels who know our own coast well should rout them easily if they came too close.”

EASTBOURNE,

Sussex

WENTWORTH,

Show this to no one except Croft. I have been sent to Eastbourne to investigate claims of strange coastal activity. At first it was thought to be smuggling, and smuggling it might still be, but activity in the area is incredibly strange, and there are quite a shocking number of agents involved.

The agreed methods of communication with headquarters have proven to have been tampered with or faulty, and I have no trustworthy military assets to assist me here. I must put my own pieces into place until help arrives.

You and your fellow captains know all of the places to hide in wait on the coast, and if you chose to settle in nearby until further notice, I would consider it a favour. Who knows, perhaps something will happen, and there may be some fame and prize money for you and your friends.

COL. R. Fitzwilliam

* * *

DARCY WOKE after another night on a hard, wet floor. He had been in the cave for days, though now he was manacled. Wickham was always close by, Darcy could hear him speaking, but never entered the area in which Darcy was held, likely not wishing to be questioned by him. Every other day, a haggard old woman dressed in rags would appear, giving him a hard crust of bread and a small pitcher of water, but she refused to speak to him. Darcy was starving, wet, filthy, and barely had the ability to attend to his more personal needs.

He had spent days listening to Wickham and a man, who Darcy now understood to be the man known as Huggins, whom they had seen in Meryton. There was to be an invasion in Eastbourne. The French would actually land here. Darcy did not know how many ships were coming, or how they believed the plot would be successful, but it was absolutely certain that an invasion was planned, and that it would happen in mere days.

“There is something else that must happen before the landing, and you must see to it,” said Huggins in his gravelly voice. “The foreign secretary’s other brat has arrived, with his wife and children. You will remove them from the situation. The daughter too.”

“I am to get rid of Ashley *and* his whole family? And his sister? How am I to kill so many at once?” Wickham objected.

“That is your problem,” Huggins said darkly. “Burn the house if you must.”

“That would have been easier in Derbyshire, where Matlock is isolated,” Wickham protested. “Here in Eastbourne, they have the fire brigade close by. Not to mention, you have seen all of the men watching the house. It is not half a regiment, but I will never get close to the place, particularly considering that most of the men watching are Darcy’s men, and they all know me.”

“No one cares how you do it, just get it done, *before* the ball,” Huggins snarled. Darcy then heard the man leave.

Darcy could not countenance what he had just heard. Ashley’s entire family! And what on earth had Priscilla done

to anyone? He waited a few moments to be sure Wickham was alone before bellowing, “Wickham! You have ignored me long enough, get in here, damn you!”

Wickham entered the small section of the cave in which Darcy had been held since he arrived. “Been eavesdropping, Darce? You know that they say if you listen to the conversations of others, you might hear something upsetting.”

“Wickham, could I possibly interest you in a bank draft for twenty thousand pounds and passage on a ship for Canada?” Darcy said hopefully. Perhaps if he appealed to Wickham’s avarice, he could remove them both from this situation before it happened.

Wickham laughed hysterically. “Are you jesting? The time for that has long passed, Darcy. I am in this so deep, I shall never dig myself out. My only hope now is to go to France. They have a chateau and a fortune waiting for me there. You always were cheap with your bribes.”

“Wickham, if you believe you will make it to France alive, you are more stupid than I ever believed. Why would they keep any promises to you?”

“I know you saw me and my contact in Meryton. Did you not recognise my uncle?” Wickham asked. “Huggins is only a name he uses while in England.”

Darcy stopped and thought for a moment. A man had arrived in Derbyshire when they were boys, and Mrs Wickham Senior had claimed him as her brother. He had stayed for perhaps two weeks before Mr Wickham had decided that there was something sinister and suspicious about the man, and at Mr Darcy’s request, had sent him packing. Darcy had been but eight years old, and for the life of him he could not recall the man’s appearance or the French name he had gone by.

“You believe that just because he is your uncle, or *claims* to be so, that he is to be trusted?” Darcy scoffed. “You do not *know* him, George. You did not grow up with him as your doting uncle. Why would he give a piss about you? How can you be certain you are not being used?”

“Whether I am or whether I am not, I am in too deep to turn back now,” Wickham said.

“And you do not mind murdering Ashley’s entire family? To what purpose? What the hell is wrong with you, George? My father gave you a home when your parents died, gave you an education, connections, he gave you a real chance! How have you come to this?” Darcy demanded. “What is it that has broken inside you that you would murder three small children?”

“You know that I have no quarrel with Carlisle or his family,” confessed Wickham. “And the idea of harming Priscilla, well you must remember, Darcy, you know how I felt about her when we were young. It grieves me a bit. But I have no choice. When I say that I am in too deep, that means I must do everything they tell me, or they will kill me. I could not even hope with any confidence that I might be safe in Canada. I have no choice but to proceed.”

“You should never have let yourself be dragged into this!” Darcy said angrily.

“You ought to have just given me an estate, Darcy. It was cruel of your father to raise me as a gentleman and give me no means to continue as one. I was not raised to work.” Wickham shrugged. “You ought to enjoy what little time you have left. I will not even lie and suggest that I look forward to killing you, but it will have to be done in a day or so. I will probably send one of the other men to do it. My parting gift to you is that I shall not force you to look into my eyes as the light leaves you.” Wickham left him then, as Darcy shouted and screamed in rage for Wickham to come back and discuss this rationally, like men.

CHAPTER 47



*D*uchcov, Czechia - 1798

AN OLD MAN lay ailing in a bed in a darkened study in Duchcov. He had been ill for some time, making the journey to his book room impossible, and so his bed had been moved there for his comfort some months ago.

Giacomo Casanova contemplated his life and experiences as he laid back on his pillows. He had finished writing “The Story of My Life,” some years before, and had bequeathed it in his will to his nephew. He had nothing to look forward to now, but the spectre of death when it came for him.

But there! Was that not the spectre of death? Casanova gasped as a shadowed figure in the darkened doorway entered the room. He relaxed as he recognized his visitor. Not death. Just an old friend, another celebrated and learned impostor, like himself. Though he must admit, it had been many years since he had seen this man, and his lack of age since their last meeting made him wonder if the man was as much an impostor as he and Voltaire had always claimed.

“*I can see you perfected the stone,*” rasped Casanova in Italian as his old acquaintance entered the room. The man had not aged a day since they had first met eight and twenty years ago.

“*I can see you have not,*” returned the Count of St Germain in the same language.

“I was never a proper alchemist, you know that,” said Casanova, his head falling back to the pillows.

“That did not prevent you from accepting thousands from Madame Pompadour, in payment for your services,” quipped the *comte*, taking a seat next to the bed.

“Can you blame me?” Casanova barked out in laughter. *“The woman wasted so much money, someone had to collect it.”*

The two men sat late into the night, discussing the future of the continent, celestial alignments, and the properties of the philosopher’s stone.

“You are always at ease. The rest of us, scurrying about, we have so much to do before our time ends. You never seem concerned about the future, or what it holds for you,” said Casanova.

“Time has little meaning to those of us who understand it,” the *comte* said, smiling sadly at the dying man.

“Do you believe there is anything after this?” Casanova asked. *“If anyone might know, I feel it would be you.”*

“There is, at least for some people,” answered St Germain as he gazed at the man laying back on the pillows.

“Well, that is something,” sighed Casanova, *“I have lived as a philosopher, and die as a Christian.”*

St Germain said nothing more, only sat next to the other man through the night, slipping from the room and leaving as the light of dawn crept in. When the maid entered an hour later, her master had passed on to meet his maker.

CHAPTER 48



The following day was a busy one at Bourne House. Ashley went about with Lady Catherine, and met with the magistrate, several local landowners, and the mayor. They also met with Mr Buckle from the East Sussex Volunteer Corps, and Ashley used all of his commanding presence as well as the promise of a generous donation to the corps, if they would rally their forces and continue the search for Darcy with renewed motivation.

Croucher dressed as a rough man and met with several local men in the pub. Men who had families to feed, and who were occasionally obliged to break the law to do so, but were still good Englishmen. They had been afraid to speak too much, but it had been them that had sounded out the local clergyman to alert the magistrate to the strange activity. There were several caves on the coast that were rarely used by smugglers, because during some tides, they were sometimes completely flooded, and therefore dangerous, although they did not usually flood entirely this time of year. These caves were only ever accessible during low tide, and few locals ever explored them. Even the lads knew better than to go exploring and get themselves trapped, or worse, drowned.

Croucher could not promise the men that the army would look the other way to their smuggling endeavours, obviously Richard was here to report whatever he found. But in consideration that there may be something far more sinister happening, perhaps the smugglers could pause their activities, and tell *him* what they knew, and they might rid themselves of whatever intruders were encroaching on their territory.

Knowing that the area was being investigated, the smugglers could absent themselves from the coast for a few weeks. They were not expecting a drop before then.

The men explained that there were few locations from which one might view the entrance to the caves at low tide without being observed, and made arrangements with Croucher to lead him there the following day.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS SUNDAY, and the entire household was seen in church, and spoke to the townspeople of the search for Darcy as they departed. Ashley and Arabella, wishing to observe the Lord's Day as well as they ought, but also needing to expend the energy of three rambunctious boys who had travelled by carriage for days, planned to take a basket lunch and their boys for a drive after church. Georgiana and their Aunt Priscilla – who was recovering from her ordeal – and appreciated the distraction – were desolate at the idea of being left behind, so Ashley had rented a shooting break¹ from the livery, and the outing would be comfortable and pleasant for all, even with their large party.

The family waved goodbye to their friends and relations as they pulled away from the church after services, and headed out towards the coast and the cliffs, followed by four armed men on horseback. They drove for perhaps an hour, high spirits all the way, before stopping near a small village called East Dean, and took their picnic near the cliffs, running and playing with the children for two hours before they tired, when Arabella and the two younger ladies herded Ashley and the boys back into the carriage and headed for home.

When they were perhaps a mile from Eastbourne's village, there came a shout from over a hill, and suddenly, a large group of brigands on horseback crested the small rise, and gave chase, whooping, and shooting into the air. There were too many for their armed guards to overcome on their own, and so their groom whipped up his horses, and drove them as fast as could be done without overturning the conveyance. The ladies screamed, and the boys began to cry in terror as Ashley

turned about backwards and began shooting carefully with the two smoothbore muskets he had produced from under the bench. Each musket held four shots, and Ashley, one of the best shots of his year amongst the men at Cambridge, managed to hit two of the men who were chasing them, and the guards on horseback unhorsed two more, reducing their number to four.

All of the men were now without shots, and the brigands surrounded the carriage and engaged with their guards as the carriage fled down the lane, perilously close to the cliffside. Suddenly Ashley realised what was happening. "They are trying to drive us off of the cliffs!" he shouted to the driver, who in response sharply turned the horses away from the edge, and drove straight into the midst of their attackers, sending them and their horses scattering, though they turned and gave chase with their swords. The ladies and children huddled on the floor of the open carriage, crying and screaming, as Ashley did his best to shield them.

After a short distance, their attackers fell back. All of the men's guns were now without shots, the attackers' numbers had been greatly reduced, and it was too late to drive the carriage off of the cliffs. They were now coming too close to the town, and as the attackers fell back. Ashley's men followed them into the village, unwilling to leave their master and his family without protection in order to give chase.

Ashley and the men called to the house as the horse galloped into their crescent, and the driver pulled them up abruptly. Arabella and the ladies were entirely hysterical, and the children were sobbing and clinging to their mother, who was entirely overwhelmed. The women and children were all carried upstairs, the ladies dosed heavily with brandy and laudanum. Even the boys were given a heavy dose of brandy, but they could not be parted from their mother, and were all piled into her bed to collapse into shock and exhaustion with her.

The magistrate was sent for, not that there was anything he could do, but a great number of local men were roused from their homes to mount their horses and go out in search of the

brigands. Obviously the ones who had escaped were not found, though the roads had been followed in all directions. The ones who had been shot were all dead. They were dressed as peasants, in homespun, though the quality of their muskets and swords, plus their ability to not only ride, but fight on horseback meant they were anything but what they appeared.

Pictures of the dead men were drawn by a local man, signs were put up all over Eastbourne and sent to the neighbouring towns, and rewards for information were placed in the newspapers, but there was very little information to go on. Ashley was enraged by the attempt on his family. He had recognised Wickham as one of the men on horseback, and swore upon all that he held holy, that if he encountered the man, he would not be nearly so lenient as his brother and cousin had been in the past.

* * *

HUGGINS WAS FURIOUS. *“You failed? Failed entirely? You went out with seven other armed men on horseback, and did not even manage to harm a single hair on the head of even the most helpless child?”* he shouted at Wickham in French.

“They had armed men with them,” Wickham protested in the same language. *“We lost four of our own!”*

“You don’t have a damned excuse to have lost four men, you stupid fool!” screamed Huggins. *“Our contact’s terms were that these people were to be killed before the landing! What if he does something now to prevent it!”*

“Why is it so important for the Fitzwilliams to die? Who the hell is your contact?” Wickham demanded in confusion.

“Now I must ensure that a group of men must attack the house during the landing. We need every man to engage the residents of this stinking town so that we can breach the castle!” Huggins said savagely, ignoring Wickham’s question. *“I do not have fifty men to waste on doing the job which you have not!”*

Wickham was quiet for a moment. *“What has this to do with the castle?”*

“Mind your own business, damn you! Obviously, they are not landing without a reason. Do you believe that four ships, even with well over a thousand men, can successfully invade this pitiful island? Evidently, there must be a purpose! They are coming to look for something. If I wanted you to know this, you would have been told.”

“And you are certain that there is property and a reward waiting for me in France,” Wickham said, sounding dubious for the first time with the man who had approached him months ago, claiming to be his mother’s brother.

“Nephew, I swear to you. If you assist me in returning this great treasure to the Emperor, you will be rewarded beyond all of your wildest dreams,” Huggins promised. *“That is, if you can do even one thing right before the landing.”*

Darcy laid his head back against the cold stone. Wickham had attempted to kill his cousin’s family. What had happened? Had any of them been hurt? He recalled Huggins’ remark that not even a hair on the head of the children had been harmed, and prayed that this was true.

* * *

ON MONDAY, Bourne House was mostly quiet. They had received a visit from the mayor and the magistrate, both contrite, and with no information about the attack or about Darcy. Arabella had still not left her rooms, she remained in her bed with her children, and refused to come out, for a ball, or for any other reason until they were to leave this awful place. Ashley believed they ought to return to Matlock, but would not send them without him, no matter how large a guard went with them, so until Darcy was found, Arabella and the boys would have to remain.

Priscilla and Georgiana made their way downstairs at breakfast, but they were subdued. Elizabeth and Lydia did not take their morning walk, all things considered, and the company around the table at Bourne House was down in the mouth as they all assembled for the morning meal.

“I still cannot believe there has been no sign of Darcy, no sign at all,” complained Bingley as he made a plate for Jane,

and took a place next to her at the table.

“How could he have disappeared, quite into thin air?” Jane agreed.

Elizabeth, pale, and with dark circles under her eyes, said nothing, but considered returning to her bed when she had broken her fast. She ought not to have even come down. She could not bear the company of the others.

“I still cannot believe that we are going to the ball to dance,” said Caroline. “I do not believe I have ever felt less like dancing, not even when I first entered Meryton at that little assembly.”

“Perhaps *some* of you are going to dance,” said Mary bitterly.

“Whatever do you mean, Mary?” asked Jane.

Mary, realising that all eyes were suddenly upon her, clammed up, and said, “Nothing.” She then stood and left the table, leaving her napkin by her plate.

“I wonder what on earth that was about,” Lydia said, as Elizabeth gazed after her sister and then pierced William with an intense stare. He squirmed under her scrutiny, and excused himself, following after Mary.

* * *

“I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU!” exclaimed William as he followed Mary into the garden behind the house. “How *can* you think of yourself at such a time!”

“*You* cannot believe *me*?” cried Mary, feeling all of the shame her betrothed thought she should feel. “I did not lie. They *know* they are dancing, they have been *asked*! How am I to even know how I am spending tomorrow evening? Have you bothered to speak to me at all in almost a fortnight? I have no idea if I am even to save the first for you! What if another man asks me? Am I to decline and sit out the night? Are we not dancing at all because of Mr Darcy, or are we dancing, like the others, in order to be seen and make people think of him, as Lady Catherine wishes? You have not spoken a word of

your intentions to me, so I am apparently meant to attend the ball not *knowing* what to expect!”

“When am I meant to speak to you, precisely?” asked William. “Am I meant to interrupt while you are spending half of every day talking and laughing with that man, and the rest pounding your keys as if your instrument is the only thing in the world to you?”

“I am *practising!*” Mary protested. “We have both spent *months* on our self improvement, and suddenly I am wicked because *you* are jealous of the *comte*? We sit in the drawing room every night, and you have every opportunity to speak with me! You do not offer to turn my pages, you do not sit next to me, and you do not talk to me any more!”

“When am I meant to speak to you in the evening?” demanded her betrothed. “When you are performing for the attention of our company, or when they are cheering and you are enjoying your accolades?”

“Oh!” cried Mary. “Oh, you dreadful man. What sort of man prefers his bride when she is stupid and without talent? I have spent my *entire life* working on my accomplishments, it is the only thing I am allowed, as a young gentlewoman, and when I finally have achieved the only dream I have ever had, to play well, you resent me! You are supposed to be *happy* for me! You are supposed to be *proud* of me! All I wished for is to be good at one thing, so that you might have a wife you could be proud of! I am not hurting anybody! It is not as if I am meant to go out canvassing the town each day looking for Mr Darcy. No one chastises Lydia and Georgie for practising the harp! No one disapproves of Jane for taking up her embroidery! It is not as if I am socialising in the assembly rooms each afternoon! William, what have I done? Why do you hate me so?” She turned and fled into the house.

William felt chastised as he realised that he had been unfair to Mary. He could go out each day and do as he pleased. There were few activities that were appropriate for Mary, and the one thing she had loved all of her life, that she had dreamed of becoming proficient at, was a most appropriate activity, and it *was* unfair of him to berate her for her

enjoyment of it, when she had little else to occupy her time. She could have remained at home with her parents, learning in the kitchens, and helping with the tenants, for she had always been a useful woman. Instead, she had agreed to travel with him here to bring comfort and counsel when his patroness was thought to be dying, and this was how he repaid her.

When he followed her into the house, he went to the music room. He knew he would find her here. When his Mary was filled with sadness or despair, she sought solace at the pianoforte. She was not playing when he entered the room. She had her head down on her folded arms, and sobbed over the keys.

He drew close and sat next to her on the bench, and said, "I was jealous."

Mary raised her head, hiccuping, and said, "What?"

"I was jealous!" he said again as he rose again and took a few steps away, and stood with his back to her. He took a deep breath, and then turned back around to face her. "The *comte* made you laugh. He made you laugh here, in this room, every day. He helped you in a manner that I could not, and I was jealous. I feared that you were falling in love with him."

"William, we are *betrothed!*" said Mary, aghast. "It is the same as being married, in my view. My heart is closed to all men but you."

"I should know that, but you are so beautiful, and he is so smart and funny, and rich, and he plays so well. How could I compete with such male elegance?" William confessed. "And now you have perfected your talent, and your sisters are likely going to marry well, or at least Lizzy will if we find Mr Darcy, and if she does not, Jane will surely accept Mr Bingley, and what on earth do you need me for now?"

"William! I gave you my word!" said Mary, shocked by his admission. Suddenly she began to weep afresh. "What are you saying? Are you saying you do not wish to marry me any longer?"

“No! I am-” William broke off as he beheld Mary, and as she wept as though her heart would break, he saw the extent of his great error. “Mary. Would you be so kind as to reserve the first and the supper dance for me?”

Mary sniffled as he handed her his handkerchief. “Are you certain?” she asked. “I do not wish to use tears to force you into dancing if you feel that it is not appropriate with Mr Darcy missing.”

“If you can bear to be seen in public with such a blockhead, it would make me very happy indeed,” he promised.

“Very well,” Mary said, wiping her eyes.

“And the last? Will you favour me with the last as well?” he begged. “Mary, if you will forgive my stupidity, I will spend my life making it up to you.”

“And you will not be angry at me for practising any more?” Mary asked.

“Never again,” he insisted. “I *am* very proud of you. I am just intolerably stupid, as well.”

“Very well then,” she allowed. Then she gave him a watery smile. “The *comte* says that he likes you. He says that you are a good man, and that I am fortunate in you. I hope that if we are practising another time, that you might come in and say hello.”

“I will, darling,” William promised. “I assure you that I most certainly will.”

* * *

LATE THAT NIGHT, a meeting was held in Lady Catherine’s private sitting room with Georgiana, Ashley, Richard, their aunt, and Mr Croucher. “Tell us Croucher, what have you found?” demanded Richard.

“Well, Colonel, sir, the local men, they took me to see the entrances to the caves. There are a few ways to come up on them unexpected, like,” answered the man. “When you leave

tonight, sir, it will still be a good time to get a look. I will take you there.”

After the meeting had ended, where the only useful information was that which was shared by Croucher, Richard accompanied Croucher to the coast line, where the man showed him how to access the caves in question. It was very late at night, and very dark. Thankfully they encountered no one, though they did not draw close.

Richard and Croucher made a plan, in which men who Richard trusted, likely his father’s men, some of whom had arrived with his brother, were to be stationed on horseback near the different entrances to the town, to wait for the dragoons, and direct them to a secluded location until Richard could brief them. When the men arrived, on the very next low tide, they would ambush the caves, hopefully finding Darcy, and rounding up the ringleaders of whatever ghastly plot was unfolding in Eastbourne.

If General Vane had sent the unit, and if they travelled at the speed at which Richard prayed they would, the dragoons should be here by tomorrow, or the following day at the latest.

1 A Shooting Break was a large, open country carriage with four wheels and a hood, which was large enough to convey six sportsmen, and even their dogs and rifles.

CHAPTER 49



The night of Lady Amesbury's ball was a magnificent evening. It was not too hot, although Elizabeth was certain that the ballroom would be steaming later, even with a cool breeze coming off of the coast. She boarded Darcy's coach with Lydia, Georgiana, and Priscilla. The others crowded into Lady Catherine's and Lord Carlisle's carriages, and the party set off for the ball. Arabella understandably still had not stirred from her rooms, nor left her children, so she remained behind at Bourne House. Anne and Priscilla were equally in no mood for dancing, but they consented to join the others, for Darcy's sake. Anne thought the locals were abominable and barbaric, throwing lavish affairs and celebrating when there was a man missing, and there were men in their town attempting to kidnap or murder people.

Elizabeth dreaded the event. She knew Lady Catherine was correct, the locals had given up on Mr Darcy far too easily. Elizabeth saw the sense to join them in their revelries, all the while reminding them that the search must resume tomorrow. But where to search? They had searched every inch of Eastbourne. Every estate had been combed, all of the outbuildings, the woods, the beaches, the caves that were safe enough to enter. The mayor and the local men were hard put to know where to look next.

Elizabeth had never seen so many officers at one entertainment, not even Mr Bingley's ball. Mr Bingley had invited the entire regiment, but Colonel Forster had understandably left a large number of men on duty at the camp. It did not look as if Colonel Allen had done that tonight.

The young ladies on Lady Amesbury's guest list would not want for partners.

Each member of their party wore a blue ribbon tied about their arm. Georgiana and Lydia had gone and purchased every inch of blue ribbon at Johnson's, cutting them into appropriate lengths, and each young lady carried a large handful in her reticule.

"Good evening, Lady Catherine, we are so grateful that your party joined us," said Lady Amesbury in the receiving line. "Oh look, everyone in your party is wearing a blue ribbon! Whatever for?"

"We wear our blue ribbons to remind everyone to keep looking for my poor brother, Lady Amesbury," said Georgiana forwardly, turning beet red as she did so. "Would you like to wear one as well?"

"Indeed, we brought enough to share," Lady Catherine, as she opened her reticule and pulled out a ribbon, and the ladies proceeded to boldly tie ribbons on the arms of their hosts and the family.

"What an interesting idea," Lady Amesbury said tolerantly as she allowed Georgiana to tie the blue ribbon, which clashed terribly with the lady's gown, to her upper arm. The rest of their party was tight lipped as they entered the ballroom, whereupon the ladies all burst into giggles.

"How bold you have become, Georgie!" Priscilla laughed. "And here she is, afraid to go into society in London!"

"I believe you could tie a blue ribbon on the arm of Lady Jersey in the middle of Almack's with a straight face and get away with it, little cousin," Ashley teased a blushing Georgiana. "You will do very well indeed when you go to London."

The party split up, Jane and Mary to stroll on the arms of their suitors, Lady Catherine to speak to the dowagers and other guests, while Anne, Priscilla and Caroline were besieged with requests to dance. Elizabeth was also mobbed by gentlemen and officers, but she accepted no dances, and stayed

with Georgiana, Lydia, and Mrs Annesley. Their party strolled the room, spoke with their friends, and passed out blue ribbons to everyone who wished for one.

* * *

BY THE TIME the first dance started, more than two thirds of the guests had blue ribbons tied to their arms. Most of those without were officers, who were not permitted to alter their uniforms in any way. Elizabeth was wistful and did her best not to weep a bit as the ladies and gentlemen spun about the floor, but it did give her joy to see her sisters dancing with their gentlemen. Jane had confessed to Elizabeth that she and Bingley agreed that they could not take joy in becoming engaged while Mr Darcy's fate was unknown, and they had agreed to wait, at least for now, before entering an engagement. Elizabeth knew that Jane was making the sacrifice for her, and she loved her sister for it.

The Woodhouses attended the ball, and Miss Woodhouse danced the first with her father, the second with Lord Carlisle, who wished to show his gratitude for her assistance to his sister and cousin. The young lady was in excellent looks, and credited her recovery to the fine air of Eastbourne. Thankfully, the young lady good-naturedly accepted her blue ribbon from Georgiana without complaint, and made no mention of any kind of Mr Darcy all evening, even when the other women were speaking of the search to other guests. Miss Woodhouse rightfully guessed that Elizabeth's patience was hanging by a thread, and thankfully said nothing indelicate to upset her.

The marvel of the ball was the magnificent ruby that Lady Gordon wore. Her husband, Sir Charles Gordon, was a local baronet whose grandfather had made a fortune in iron mines several decades before. It was rumoured that Sir Charles had engaged the *comte* to enlarge the jewel by some method of alchemy, and the endeavour had been successful.

Elizabeth sat between Lydia and a captain from the regiment at dinner, where the main topic was many discussions as to the authenticity of the enormous stone in Lady Gordon's pendant.

“Poor Lady Amesbury,” said Lydia privately to her sister. “Between Lady Gordon’s jewel, and Mr Darcy’s blue ribbons, our hostess has been quite eclipsed this evening.”

Lydia was not wrong, Elizabeth thought as she watched Lady Amesbury shoot daggers at Lady Gordon with her eyes from across the room. The ladies of their party had been appallingly direct about stealing the focus of the night for Mr Darcy with their ribbons, and the excitement and speculation about the blood red jewel had put an end to any notice or talk of the party arrangements. At least there would still be the fireworks later, Elizabeth thought. Lady Amesbury ought to still receive a certain amount of acclaim for that. Everyone at the party was looking forward to them. However, Lord Amesbury said they were to be set off very late, after the rest of the town was likely in their beds.

When they returned to the ballrooms, Elizabeth and the younger ladies took seats by the side of the room. “Eliza,” said Caroline Bingley, coming up alongside them. When she used the appellation now, it was with sincere affection, and as a private joke between the ladies, Elizabeth now used the name *Caro* when referring to her friend in all sincerity “Eliza, is that not the officer everyone made a fuss over in Meryton?”

Elizabeth looked up in time to see Wickham skirt through the edge of the room, and out one of the doors leading to the hall. “Where did he come from?” she gasped.

“He came in the French doors from the gardens only moments ago,” answered Caroline, “He was looking across the room at Lord Amesbury, who nodded to him, and then left by that same door with Colonel Allen.”

“Do not leave this spot,” Elizabeth commanded Georgiana and Lydia. She rose and left the young ladies with Caroline and Mrs Annesley as she followed Lieutenant Wickham into the great hall. As she entered the hall, she looked down to her left, and saw Wickham go down another hall. She followed the man down two darkened halls, obviously part of the house that guests were not meant to visit tonight, and stopped in front of the door that Wickham had entered.

“I cannot believe the night has arrived,” she heard Lord Amesbury say. “Huggins says that the castle has been watched enough to be certain that there are few servants, and they are all very old. I do not know what they seek there, but the fireworks will cover enough of the sound of the landing, and create enough of a distraction for the French to get at least most of the way to the castle before the residents realise what is happening. The fireworks are the signal that nothing is suspected and it is safe to come ashore. Even once it is realised, once the landing is achieved, the sheer numbers of the landing party will prevent the townspeople or even the militia posing too much of a challenge. You are certain that they will not attack this house?”

“They will not attack any house completely surrounded with well lit torches,” promised Wickham. “That is the signal Huggins gave you. The other great houses in the area will be lit, of course, but yours will be the only one completely surrounded with torches. They will have been told to look for that, and they will leave at least two or three other houses nearby untouched, in order to ensure you are not suspected.”

“What is the situation at the tower, Allen?” asked Lord Amesbury.

“There is always a sentry at the top, watching the waters, and ready to light the beacon if there is any sign of invasion. The man I placed there tonight is a drunkard; I ensured that he would gain access to a bottle earlier this evening, and that another would magically appear at his post. He is notoriously weak willed; I assure you he will be unconscious by the landing, and he is incredibly difficult to wake when he is in his cups, I have experienced. He should sleep through the entire event. When are we expecting our visitors?”

“Within two hours, I would say,” answered Wickham. “They will want to come in on the low tide, so they can see any obstacles, and the men can wade ashore.”

“Have you received your payment?” asked Colonel Allen.

“Huggins delivered it today. More than enough to solve my present difficulties, and save my heir from marrying that

sickly heiress out there,” answered Lord Amesbury.

“He should marry her anyway,” Wickham advised. “I have known her since childhood, and it is certain that she will not live to a great age. Childbirth would certainly finish her off. He could have a possible heir, an estate, a fortune, and be widowed and as rich as Croesus in a few short years.”

“But if she had a sickly child,” considered Lord Amesbury.

“She has not always been ill,” said Wickham. “Her heart was weakened by scarlet fever. No reason her child might not be healthy.”

“Hmmm... I will tell Bexley to take that under advisement,” said Lord Amesbury. “Have you taken care of everything on your end?”

“I have several loose ends that must be tied up yet, and they are scattered all over town,” spat Wickham. “I have been given a rather difficult task and there really doesn’t seem to be any way to manage it. I have to lead a great deal of the French to Bourne House and attack it, and while some of my targets are there, the rest of them are here, save one.”

“Have you not done away with him yet?” said Allen scathingly. “And you said *Bexley* was squeamish.”

“*Bexley is* squeamish, I should know,” said the man in question’s father.

“You never know when Darcy could come in handy,” scoffed Wickham. “I am not one to squander my resources.”

Suddenly there was scuffing of wood across the floor, the sound of chairs being pulled back. Elizabeth rushed several feet down the hall, in the opposite way from which she had come, and hid in a convenient alcove. The door opened, and she surreptitiously watched the men leave Lord Amesbury’s study and return back down the hall to the party. Before she could move to follow them back, a warm hand grasped her arm.

CHAPTER 50



Smothering a shriek, Elizabeth nearly jumped out other skin to find the *comte* standing right next to her. “Do not follow, *mademoiselle*. There is another way.” She followed him down the hall, then another, then another. Then suddenly they were back in the great hall.

“Excuse me, I must go,” Elizabeth said in agitation, desperate to find Ashley and Lady Catherine.

“Wait, *mademoiselle*,” the *comte* advised. “I heard the same conversation that you did. Do not run off without your head.”

“You? How?” Elizabeth asked in surprise.

“There is a grate in the wall on the other side of the room,” the *comte* answered. “Now, you have the answer, do you not, about your beau?”

Elizabeth considered. “He is still alive,” she said.

“The traitor’s targets are his family. The children are at Bourne House, the rest of them are here, save one?” the *comte* said, reminding her of Wickham’s words.

Wickham is going to attack Bourne House! Who is there besides the children and Arabella?” she gasped. “Why would they do such a thing? And where is Wickham keeping Darcy?”

“That colonel knows,” said the *comte*. “He is planning to attack the caves near Beachy Head – your young man is there. That is where that Wickham came from tonight. I saw him

near there this afternoon. The locals never go there, the caves can be dangerous.”

“Colonel Allen? But he is one of them!” exclaimed Elizabeth.

“Not Colonel Allen. The other colonel. Her ladyship’s nephew,” said St Germain.

“But Colonel Fitzwilliam is away on a mission for the war office!” said Elizabeth in confusion.

“We must go to the little sister,” St Germain said decidedly. Elizabeth followed him back into the ballroom as he made a beeline for Georgiana and Lydia, who were waiting worriedly with Mrs Annesley.

“Georgiana, do you know where to find Colonel Fitzwilliam?” asked Elizabeth directly as she approached the younger girl.

Georgiana started in surprise at the unexpected question. “Do not delay, for the sake of your brother, *ma petite*,” St Germain said sternly. “The need for secrecy has passed. Your brother’s time is near.”

Georgiana squeaked in terror, and looked at Elizabeth in fear. “You must tell me, immediately, Georgie. There is not a single moment to lose,” Elizabeth encouraged.

Georgiana composed herself, and said, “There is a forgotten shack on the far end of Peas Hill. It is just past the giant oak, set back far from the lane, you can hardly tell that it is there, but a cluster of poppies marks the entrance to the path that leads to it. Lizzy, he is hardly ever there, and once you go there he will not be able to return.”

“It cannot be helped, Georgie. Darcy is being held in some caves by Beachy Head, and someone must tell Richard immediately,” Elizabeth said firmly. She then looked about her and realised that the *comte* had disappeared. “How am I to manage all of this on my own!” she stamped her foot in frustration, then told Georgiana and Lydia to stay put, and left them.

* * *

ELIZABETH APPROACHED Lady Gordon when the lady happened to be alone. “Lady Gordon, I have a serious problem, and I know not who to turn to for assistance,” she began.

“My dear girl, I told you the very day we met that if you ever need *anything*, that I am your grateful servant!” exclaimed Lady Gordon.

As much as Elizabeth was far too well bred to ever call in a favour, she had no choice. “Lady Gordon, I am certain you heard about the incident with Lord Carlisle’s carriage two days ago?” When that lady nodded, Elizabeth took a breath and said in a low rush, “I have just learned that they may be in danger again. Lady Carlisle is alone at Bourne House with the children and servants, and I must find a secret haven for them for the night.”

“My dear, you must have them taken to Gordon Lodge immediately!” the lady gasped, ready to leap into action.

“Wait! Lady Gordon, we still know not where the threat comes from! It must be a complete secret! I have a suspicion that the villain is here in this very ballroom, and that the other members of Lord Carlisle’s family are in danger as well,” Elizabeth begged.

“A plot against the foreign secretary’s *family!*” Lady Gordon breathed. “Miss Elizabeth, the Gordons of Eastbourne will do our duty! What do you need?”

“Could you please send one of your servants to your estate with all haste, informing them to expect the occupants of Bourne House, and that your manor must be *completely surrounded* by lit torches. As many as possible. It may keep the house safe this night,” Elizabeth said. “You should find an excuse to call for your carriage as quickly as possible. You and Sir Charles must either stay here at the ball until the very end, or leave immediately, I fear the streets may not be safe within the hour, perhaps two.”

“I will do it my dear, of course, but whatever do you mean?” asked the lady.

“I am sure I do not know at all what I mean, Lady Gordon, but you will have my gratitude for your help,” Elizabeth said earnestly.

“I shall not even send a servant,” Lady Gordon declared. “I shall turn my ankle, and demand my carriage forthwith. It will not be unbelievable. I am not known for being graceful on the dance floor.”

Next, Elizabeth went to Ashley. “Lord Carlisle, I cannot spend the time confiding everything I have just learned, but there is to be an invasion by sea tonight, and your family, as the relations of the foreign secretary, seem to be the target of a plot,” she attempted to explain in a rush.

“That seems to be nothing new considering what happened two days ago, but is there some new particular threat to my family, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked sharply.

“I have just learned that Bourne House is to be attacked tonight, and that Colonel Allen and Lord Amesbury are involved,” said Elizabeth. “I have arranged in secret for everyone to be given refuge for the night at Gordon Lodge. You must go to Bourne House immediately and move Lady Carlisle and the children as quickly as possible. Take Priscilla with you, I am not certain, but I believe the family here is a target as well. I will have William round up the rest and follow you. Lord Carlisle, Gordon Lodge must be surrounded by as many lit torches as possible, that is some sort of signal devised by Wickham to make some houses safe. You must ensure it as soon as you get there.”

Ashley thanked Elizabeth profusely for his family, and went in search of Priscilla. Elizabeth went in search of her cousin. “William, I have learned something about Darcy, and I have also learnt that Bourne House and its occupants are to be attacked tonight, and that we may not even be safe here in Lord Amesbury’s House.”

“Cousin!” said William in shock. “What are we to do?”

“William, this must be a complete secret. You must not betray anything. I am to go with Lord Carlisle and Priscilla to move Arabella and the children. You must persuade Lady Catherine to feign a collapse, and have the family make their goodbyes immediately. You will go straight to Gordon Lodge. Lady Gordon is going ahead, they will expect you. Once you are there, none of you must leave. Cousin, there is going to be an invasion of the French by sea tonight. They are coming to look for something. You must make certain that the family stays inside Gordon House, and that it is surrounded by as many lit torches as can be found as quickly as possible when you get there. The men said the torches are a signal not to attack.”

William’s mouth worked up and down in shock, “But, Cousin!”

“William, there is no time! I must go!” Elizabeth’s cousin stood slack jawed as she left him, and a few moments later, when he had gone to do her bidding, she snuck out the French doors, into the garden, and away from the house, heading in the direction of Peas Hill. She had done her best, and warned who she could, but now, she must help Mr Darcy.

* * *

WHEN ELIZABETH REACHED the small cluster of poppies on Peas Hill, she turned into the barely discernible path, and made her way through the darkened overgrowth to the tiny shack that Georgiana had described. She knocked lightly on the door, then after a moment, pushed it open. It was not much of a place to sleep; Elizabeth cringed to think that Richard had been obliged to stay there.

“Lookin’ fer the colonel, miss?” came a familiar voice in the dark.

Elizabeth let out a small scream; it really was too much to ask that she be silent, no matter the risk. Her nerves were not at their best. Her courage might rise at every attempt to intimidate her, but her sensibilities were sorely tried this night.

“Tom,” she breathed. “Tom, is that you?”

“Yes, miss.” Tom melted out of the shadows. “I be keepin’ watch fer the colonel, and Mr Croucher, in case Miss Darcy needs em.”

“Will your father not be angry?” ask Elizabeth in concern.

“‘E up an’ lef’ yesterday, miss,” Tom informed her. “When he takes ‘is bag wi’ ‘im, ‘e ain’t like to come back fer months.”

“Where is Colonel Fitzwilliam, Tom?” asked Elizabeth. “We need him desperately.”

“The colonel ‘ad word from someone ‘e been waitin’ fer, miss. ‘E went out to meet ‘em,” answered Tom. “Another man, a grand officer, come lookin’ awhile ago. Never seen ‘im afore. He went inside an’ left a packet, but din’t show meself to ‘im. I’m only to wait for the folks in Bourne ‘ouse. I can run yer colonel a message faster’n anything, miss. What ye need ‘im fer?”

“You must tell Colonel Fitzwilliam that Mr Darcy is being held in some caves near Beachy Head, and that he will be eliminated tonight if we do not save him,” Elizabeth explained. “And Tom, there is to be a landing party of the French with the low tide. They are to march on the castle, they want something there. The fireworks are a signal that the town suspects nothing, and they can land!”

“I’ll go right now!” exclaimed Tom. “You wait ‘ere, miss.”

Elizabeth watched as the boy tore off into the darkness, then turned and began running in the other direction, as fast as she could, into the night.

* * *

THE EXODUS of Lady Catherine’s party and the Gordons from the ball did not attract as much attention as one might have thought. Lady Catherine was known to have an illness, and had collapsed in Eastbourne before, and someone or other always turned an ankle at a ball. Colonel Allen thought to himself that Wickham’s loose ends might be easier than he thought to tie up, since the whole family was returning home to Bourne House.

The Colonel had done his bit for the plot by assuring the mayor and others that he and his men had personally searched the caves for Darcy, ensuring that others did not go exploring the usually isolated caves. For that, and for ensuring that his regiment were doing anything but their duties when the French landed, and were instead, all dancing at the ball, Allen had received enough to pay his gambling debts and keep him until the miserly relation that he would one day inherit from expired.

It was not until Georgiana went to find Elizabeth once everyone had begun to settle in at Gordon Lodge that she realised that she was not there. William said that Elizabeth said she was going with Ashley, Ashley said that Elizabeth meant to find William and Lady Catherine, and return with the family. When Georgiana told William that she believed Elizabeth had gone to find Colonel Fitzwilliam, and the location of the shack, he kissed Mary on the forehead, and ran, heedless of invasions, or the French, or danger, out into the night, as fast as he could. Before he reached the shack, he was collared by Croucher, who stepped out of a shadow in the lane.

“I cannot stop, I must find my Cousin Elizabeth!” William cried.

“And how will you help her, you know nothing of fighting,” said Croucher, as Tom stepped out of the shadows behind him. “Colonel Fitzwilliam has gone to get the dragoons, who are waiting a few miles away. I am going to the caves to assist Miss Bennet, and he is to follow. Your country has another duty for you and young Mr Tyler tonight.”

Croucher explained that there were fireworks to be lit that evening, ostensibly as part of the celebration of Lady Amesbury’s ball, but in truth, as a signal to the French that they should land. There was also a beacon at the top of the Martello Tower, which needed to be lit, to alert the rest of the coast that there was an invasion impending, and there was also a bell on the tower that must be rung to alert the town that something was wrong¹.

William Bennet and Tom Tyler accepted their orders, and ran in opposite directions with all speed to carry them out.

1 It is unknown if there was a bell on the Wish Tower or how the town of Eastbourne alerted its residents to danger, but we will assume one for the purposes of this story.

CHAPTER 51



An elderly butler was shocked when a pounding started on the door of the castle. He opened it, prepared to soundly chastise whoever it was for disturbing the peace so late at night. The lady he served slept but little, but that was no excuse to disturb her. He was shocked to open the door to find one whom he had not seen in twenty years, perfectly preserved, before him.

“Gather everyone and ready her carriages. She is no longer safe here,” the comte said to the man in French.

“They know?” gasped the butler in the same language.

“The French know, and a landing party shall breach these shores within the hour,” the comte answered, *“She must go north at once. She can hide in London for a time before she moves again.”* Anyone could hide in London if they knew how. The city was teeming with people, all too busy with their own lives to take much note of others. The butler showed him to a small parlour before leaving to attend to the comte’s order. A beautiful, graceful woman, still stunning despite her age, occupied a chair before the fire.

“If you insist upon refusing to age, comte, the least you can do is stay away from those who must,” said the lady. *“It is rude to turn up as fresh as a daisy to remind me of my age.”*

“Your time here is at an end, madame,” the comte said. *“You must leave with all haste.”*

“Oh, I am sure it is,” answered Madame. *“I knew that the moment I heard your voice in the hall. Do not worry, comte. I*

have been preparing for my flight for some time.”

* * *

ELIZABETH DREW CLOSER to Beachy Head in the darkness. Where was the cave? She crouched in the darkness and listened carefully. Suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared Mr Wickham. Elizabeth waited as the man passed her hiding place in the darkness, and then followed him to a cave that they had seen from afar in their explorations before. They had been told by their guide that day never to approach those caves, for the high tide came in quickly, and if you were taken unawares, one might be trapped in the caves for hours, or worse, during certain times of the year, the tide could be far higher than usual, and one might drown. It had been made very clear to the young ladies and gentlemen of Bourne House that smuggling was very active in the vicinity, and to tour the caves was to put themselves at risk, so none went exploring.

Elizabeth crouched in the entrance to the cave, listening to the echoes of Mr Wickham’s footfalls, attempting to determine to what depth of the cave he was going. She followed, a bit at a time, as she found her bearings in the dark.

“Well Fitz, I suppose we have run short of time,” Wickham said nervously, as Elizabeth listened carefully.

“Wickham, it is not too late to remove yourself from this situation,” Elizabeth heard Darcy say. “Perhaps it is too late for you to prevent whatever is happening tonight, but it is not too late to save yourself from the consequences.”

“I would never escape, Darcy,” Wickham said with certainty.

“We can go straight from here to London. We can acquire horses; I will accompany you to London and obtain passage for you on the next departing ship,” Darcy promised. “Come now; you and I both know that the reason I am still alive is because you have no desire to kill me.”

“Damn you, Darcy!” snarled Wickham. “If you had only given me the living, or let me marry Georgiana, neither of us

would be here right now. If only you could have been as generous as your father, none of this would have happened!”

“George, as generous as my father was, we both know that he would never have let you marry Georgie,” said Darcy. “And as far as the living went, if my father had lived to see you take it up, it would have been impossible for you to hide your true self from him forever. If my father had lived, he would have seen you defrocked. Knowing this, how could I possibly have given you the living? You have been on a course to self destruction since we were boys, George. Let me set you on a safer path, please.”

“You do not give a damn about me!” said Wickham scathingly. “You only want to save your own skin.”

“I also want to prevent the friend of my youth from becoming a murderer,” said Darcy. “I have heard from listening that you have already attempted it, at least twice. Do you truly wish to succeed?”

“Well it is too bloody late, is it not?” shouted Wickham in anger. “Look away, Darcy. I do not wish to see your eyes.”

“No,” returned Darcy. “If you want to kill me, you shall have to look me in the eyes as you do it. I will not make it easier for you.”

“Very well then!” Wickham snarled.

“Noooooooooooo!” cried Elizabeth as she ran into the cave and shot Wickham.

* * *

ALL THREE OF them looked at one another in shock as blood spread over the shoulder of Wickham’s coat. Elizabeth looked down at the ladies’ double shot derringer that Darcy had given to her before he left for Chichester.

“It is not my place to give you a pistol, since I am not your husband or father,” he had told her. “But Wickham is here somewhere. And I find I cannot go without leaving you with something with which to defend yourself, in case you need it.”

Elizabeth had always been in the habit of insisting that her gowns be made with pockets, even her ball gowns. Sometimes she found it very inconvenient to carry a reticule. She had only done so tonight to carry the blue ribbons. Her pockets and Mr Darcy's pistol had served her well this evening.

"Elizabeth!" shouted Darcy in surprise.

"She shot me!" Wickham cried. "Your bloody strumpet shot me!" The man dropped the musket he was holding to reach up and attempt to examine his injury, and Elizabeth darted forward and kicked the weapon away, still pointing her pistol at Wickham.

"Give Darcy the key to those manacles," Elizabeth demanded of Wickham. "I will shoot you again, I swear it!"

Wickham tossed the keys to Darcy, then collapsed onto his rear, and continued to attempt to examine his shoulder.

Elizabeth rushed to Darcy and helped him unlock the manacles. The poor man could barely stand, such was the pain in his legs from the cruel contraptions, but he rose and threw his arms around Elizabeth.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" said a gravelly voice. Darcy and Elizabeth whirled about to reveal Mr Huggins, and three rough looking men.

"Leave us alone!" Elizabeth cried. "We have nothing to do with your business, and we have no way to prevent it, so I will thank you to let us pass!"

"I'm sorry, *madame*, I am afraid I cannot allow it," laughed Huggins. "You will raise an alarm, and I cannot have that."

"Even if we did, it sounds as if it is too late to prevent anything. You have no need of us; I refuse to remain." Elizabeth put her nose in the air and took hold of Darcy's hand.

"Even if that were true, I cannot allow you to leave," Huggins said carelessly. Then to Wickham, "Would you get up, you snivelling brat? It is beyond my comprehension how my sister bore a useless idiot like you, boy."

“So you are his uncle, then,” breathed Darcy. “I had my doubts.”

“I do not care if he is Queen Charlotte’s uncle!” Elizabeth shrieked. “You do not need Darcy, and we are leaving!”

She grasped Darcy’s hand tighter, and suddenly the men with Huggins moved into action, circling the two of them with their swords. Suddenly another man rushed into the room, sword raised.

“Croucher!” Darcy shouted, recognising his uncle’s man at once. Darcy hoped this meant that more help was on the way. Pushing Elizabeth behind a stack of trunks, Darcy picked up a stray sword – the room was filled with weapons of all kinds – and joined Croucher in attacking the men. The men fought, and weak as Darcy was, he fought valiantly, though Elizabeth could see that the matter was hopeless. Soon, the bad men would overtake Mr Darcy and Mr Croucher. She only had one shot left in her pistol, and she must save it for the right moment. She crouched behind the trunks, then spotted the musket that she had kicked away from Mr Wickham.

Elizabeth crawled towards the weapon, but another enormous group of rough men rushed into the room to join the others. She shrank back and hid again as Mr Darcy and Mr Croucher were surrounded.

“Well, if it is not the famous Mr Darcy,” said a high ranking officer, as he entered the cave with the men. Elizabeth did not know what all of his regalia meant, but she thought he might be some sort of general. “You know, half of Sussex has been searching for you. Bad form to make everyone worry.”

“Who the hell are you?” Darcy demanded.

The man ignored the question. “Where the devil is your cousin? It is difficult to pin all of this on the foreign secretary’s son, if he is not here.”

“What does my uncle have to do with this?” Darcy asked

“Everything of course,” the man said. “The French have their purpose here tonight, but I believe we can safely say that

neither you, nor I, nor any of the English here would be in this cave tonight if it were not for your filthy uncle!”

“Who are you?” Elizabeth cried. “What do you want?”

“I want to destroy Lord Matlock of course,” the man said scathingly. “I want to chop down his family tree, and make it look as if his own son did it. I want to kill or destroy as many of his loved ones as I possibly can. I want to ruin his life.”

“But why?” said Darcy.

“Because I want him to know how it feels!” the officer cried. “I want him to know what it is like to have everything ripped from him, I want him to feel the pain I have felt, because when it happened to me, he protected those who did it! He let go the men who killed my Marguerite, my child, because they outranked me, and because it would be bad for morale for them to be punished. I want the man who disregarded my pain to feel his mistake the way I felt his mistake!”

The officer turned on Huggins. “When are they coming?” As if his words carried an order, suddenly they heard an explosion from afar.

The sound did not come from the water but from the other direction. It came from the direction of the cliffs, where Elizabeth knew the militia had set up the fireworks display earlier that day.

* * *

WILLIAM BENNET RAN. He ran as if he had never run before. He ran at full speed in the direction of the cliffs. His chest burned, his stomach cramped, his legs screamed as he ran, but he never slowed. He blessed his recent weight loss and increased activity, for otherwise, this would never have been possible. Just as he neared the field where the fireworks were prepared, his heart dropped as one of the combustibles flew up into the sky and exploded into light.

“Wait!” He cried as he collapsed in front of the men. “No fireworks! Your colonel said no fireworks!”

“Whatever do you mean, sir!” a young officer asked in surprise as William gasped and heaved on his hands and knees.

“I am come from Lady Amesbury’s ball, there is an emergency!” William breathed, “I do not know what it is, some sort of plot, but your colonel has received an express, and needs all of his men without delay, that is why he sent me! You are to leave the fireworks, and rush to the ball with all haste!”

The young privates immediately turned about and headed in the direction of Lord Amesbury’s estate. They had a journey ahead of them, it was on the other side of Eastbourne, and even at a run, it would be at least twenty minutes before they reached it.

William lay on his back and stared at the stars for several moments, then, when he had caught his breath, he rose and began to collect all of the prepared explosives. He carried them all to the edge of the cliffs and threw them off, then turned in the direction of the Martello Tower, and began to head, at a brisk trot, in that direction to see if young Tom Tyler had been successful in his mission.

CHAPTER 52



Back in the cave, they began to hear shouts from the water. Elizabeth and Darcy looked at one another in horror as the men in the cave advanced upon them, when the cave suddenly filled with officers, with Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam at their head. Metal clashed against metal, and muskets fired, as Darcy raced to Elizabeth and pulled her behind the stack of trunks again, attempting to shield her.

There appeared to be about sixty men in the company of dragoons, and they made quick work of the rough men. Elizabeth squeaked as she observed Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam throw down his sword, stride purposefully towards Mr Wickham, and as he approached him, he reached out with his hands, grasped both sides of Mr Wickham's head, and snapped his neck savagely.

With this most necessary of tasks accomplished, Colonel Fitzwilliam looked at the higher ranking officer who had been talking them to death before he arrived, and rasped, "Spaulding."

The officer called Spaulding looked at Richard with revulsion as Richard strode up to him and spat, "Traitor!" and struck the man in the face. There was murmuring amongst the dragoons, then suddenly there was a great deal of voices outside the cave.

One of the dragoons rushed to the entrance to the cave and came back. "At least one ship has landed! The French are coming ashore!"

Suddenly, the woman who had been feeding Darcy rushed out of a section of the back of the cave that led deep into the cliffside and dragged Elizabeth back with her. Darcy had heard Wickham speak of it, and knew it to be a long corridor with many small roomlike openings. He followed, and saw the woman pull Elizabeth into a small room, then push several enormous bundles of rags in front of the small opening. He had sensed that the woman had not been unsympathetic to him when she had brought him food and water. He ensured that their hiding place was covered, then raced back to the cave opening, took a musket and a sword from a pile of weapons, strode past Wickham's lifeless form and unseeing eyes, and raced out of the cave after the dragoons.

Huggins and Spaulding had quickly disappeared into the melee when the dragoons had rushed into battle with the French. Darcy threw himself into the fighting alongside his cousin and shouted, "Richard! There are too many!"

Darcy could see in Richard's eyes that he knew this. This was what his cousin did on the front. When there were too many to fight, when other men held back, Richard rushed in. Darcy fought harder at his cousin's side.

* * *

THE WISH TOWER was quiet when William Bennet approached it. There may be one or two officers inside, but the tower was now mostly the domain of the volunteer corps, and they did not man the tower at night unless they were investigating a smuggling drop. As he came up to the Tower, he looked up to see Tom Tyler climbing the iron bars sticking out of the stone that created a ladder up the side of the tower.

Tom reached the top and looked around him. The first and only firework had exploded in the sky some minutes ago. He was glad Mr Bennet had apparently stopped the rest, but the French might still land. He would not be prevented from accomplishing the mission he had been given. There was a drunken officer sleeping on the floor next to the open door that led inside. In the middle of the roof of the tower, an incredibly large bonfire was laid, a small cauldron of lamp oil hanging above it. There was a torch burning nearby.

Tom approached the officer. Tom was an expert in determining the likeliness of a drunkard to wake, he had experience enough with his father. He shoved the officer lightly with his boot. The man did not even move. Emboldened, Tom grasped the man with both hands, and rolled him through the door, onto the landing at the top of the stairs inside. He stood and stepped back, closing the door, and bolting it from the outside, grateful the door was equipped for such, likely to protect the person who had to light the beacon.

He turned towards the bonfire, and carefully stepped up the ladder that led to the cauldron. When he reached the top, he grasped the handle and tilted it, pouring the oil carefully and slowly onto the wood below. He then descended the ladder carefully. As much as he wished to rush, he could not, this had to be done right. He could not make a single mistake.

When he reached the bottom of the ladder, he grasped the torch and stepped back a bit towards the nearby bell. He tossed the torch onto the firewood, and shielded his eyes with his hands as the blaze billowed up. As he looked up and down the coast, every minute or two, other beacons further down the coast in both directions lit one by one, each tower warning the next, as the signals got smaller and smaller in the distance. It was a sight very few might ever see in a lifetime, and for good or ill, Tom Tyler knew he would never forget this night.

He turned to the bell beside him and began to ring it with all of his might, warning the townspeople of the imminent danger. As he rang the bell, he could see small lights, candles, and torches lighting up the village, and could hear the men as they rushed into the streets, shouting instructions to one another, pulling on their boots as they rushed to the armoury. Those who already had weapons of their own rushed to the coast.

* * *

IN THE ADMIRAL'S quarters of one of His Majesty's first rate ships hiding in the waters in a cove near Eastbourne, Admiral Croft inspected a map of the local coastline with his brother-in-law and comrade in arms, Captain Wentworth, whose third rate was nearby.

“If they come, it will be at night, and it will almost certainly be by Beachy Head.” Wentworth pointed out a particular stretch of coastline. “The moon is full, if there is to be a drop, it will certainly be tonight.”

“From Fitzwilliam’s words, I sense that Eastbourne is expecting more than a smuggler’s drop,” replied Admiral Croft. “You should return to your vessel, if it is to happen tonight, it will happen soon.”

Almost as if his words had conjured it, there was suddenly a great commotion on deck. The door opened, and a midshipman rushed in, his expression one of disbelief and great excitement. The men had been on alert since one solitary firework had gone off in the sky some minutes ago.

“Sir!” The young man remembered himself and saluted the two senior officers. “The beacons are lit! Eastbourne calls for aid!” The young sailor turned and rushed back out, followed by Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth.

Sailors milled about, waiting for orders as Wentworth and Croft gazed upon a never before seen sight. The beacons of the Martello Towers were lit along the coast in both directions.

“Man your positions!” boomed Admiral Croft as Wentworth rushed with all haste to the rowboat that would return him to his ship.

CHAPTER 53



The man known in England as Huggins, more accurately known on the continent as Huguenin, led an enormous company of invaders across Eastbourne, advancing towards the castle. The rest of the men from the first and only ship to land attacked the town and its residents, distracting them from following the other company. Huguenin had planned this for months, the best route to get them to the castle without a great deal of resistance. The route they took was not perhaps the most direct, but it was the one that was more rural and isolated in nature.

After perhaps a half hour, the mob of French invaders reached the castle, which was entirely dark. There was no need to break in the door, it was standing open, and there were no candles to be found as perhaps twenty preselected men entered the house and began ransacking it without mercy. It was obvious that the residents of the house had escaped them, though Huguenin knew they had been in residence as recently as that morning.

The house was plundered thoroughly, though with the flight of the previous occupants, there was little point. Huguenin could hardly believe it had come to this. He had tracked the old woman for years. He knew she was here. Every bit of evidence pointed to the old woman as having fled with the artefact he had come to steal back to France for the Emperor. There would never be another opportunity like this. So much had been expended on this endeavour, because he had assured the Emperor that it would succeed.

The Emperor was not a forgiving man, but Huguenin's chances were better in France than in England. If he remained, he would be caught. His only chance was to return to the coast and escape to the ships in the small boat he and his nephew had prepared. His next action was to abandon the men still tearing apart the castle, and the others outside, and to return to the shore. Again, he took a roundabout way to get there, skirting around the fighting.

* * *

THE REVELLERS at the Amesbury's ball were disappointed. What had happened to prevent the promised fireworks display? Lord Amesbury and Colonel Allen looked troubled, promising to find out what had happened. The guests returned indoors, and the dancing resumed in the ballroom. Lord Amesbury and Colonel Allen retreated deep into the garden.

"What do you think has prevented the fireworks? Will they land?" hissed Amesbury.

"I have no idea what could have happened. There is no way to find out without going out to the cliffs," answered Allen.

"Colonel! Reporting for duty, sir!" one of the privates who had been assigned the task of setting off the explosives exclaimed as he rushed to his senior officer in the garden, where they had been directed by the officers inside who were guests.

"What the hell happened to the damn display?" demanded the colonel.

The young private's jaw dropped. "One of the guests from the ball, sir! He came to tell us that there was an emergency, and we were to report to you directly!"

Allen swore savagely. "What guest from the ball?"

"One of the ones from Bourne House we have been following, sir," answered the other private. "The clergyman."

"Return to camp!" Allen shouted at the two privates. Before they could obey him, they began to hear a bell ringing

from far away. The Martello Tower bell.

Suddenly, one of his lieutenants rushed out into the garden. “Colonel! A local man has just run here to say that a great number of Frenchman have just come up from the shore and attacked the village! Hundreds of Frenchmen, sir!”

Allen had no choice but to fall into his usual role. Whatever failures had occurred, he could not be seen now to have done anything but his duty. He immediately reverted to his booming militant voice, entering the ballroom and loudly commanding his men to follow him. The militia had no weapons but their swords, but they marched into the village, and began fighting the French alongside the residents of the town.

The guests of the ball were in a panic; ladies screaming hysterically and swooning. None could leave to protect their homes, or even their children who were at home with their servants, else they would be murdered in the streets. The ladies were herded upstairs. All of the male servants who had accompanied their employers to the ball, grooms and footmen alike were stationed outside to protect the house, while the men stayed on the ground floor with whatever they could find for weapons, determined that no French would climb the stairs to harm their women. Strangely, it seemed that the Frenchmen were not attacking in this direction, though everyone could hear the loud, rough voices of the Frenchmen as they moved around the area.

* * *

AFTER THE BELL had rung for some minutes, William Bennet shouted up to Tom Tyler. “Tom! Tom! Can you hear me?” The bell stopped ringing, and the boy’s face appeared. “Stay up there, Tom! Until someone comes to tell you it is safe! Keep ringing the bell!”

William heard Tom follow his direction by returning to the bell, as he turned and began to run towards the caves. When he neared the beaches, he saw Mr Darcy and Richard near the edge of the water, fighting for their lives, and to prevent as many invaders from leaving the beach. There were far fewer

invaders left near the shore; most had already headed for the village, and were fighting in the streets with the locals.

William pondered how he could be of use before rushing in. He had no sword, and was no fighter. He continued on, and eventually came upon a villager, a workman that he had seen on the streets of Eastbourne before, he thought. The poor man was dead, having been run through by a sword. By his hand was a mace. William wondered where the man would have come by such a mediaeval weapon. Surely not the armoury? Perhaps it was a family heirloom?

He bent and lifted the mace in his hand. The weight felt right in his hands. He was a man of God. Could he harm or kill another? He looked down at the dead man before him. A proper hardworking Englishman. A man with a family. Murdered for protecting his home. Thinking of the people in the village coming to harm at the hands of these terrible invaders, he thought perhaps he could use a weapon against another, if he was protecting someone innocent from harm. He would not use it otherwise.

Shortly after, he met Darcy and Richard, fighting their way into the village. He did not engage with any men, but covered the other two men's backs, protecting them from attacks from behind.

Suddenly, there was gunfire from the waters. The men turned back and looked, and saw flames shooting from cannons, as His Majesty's finest warships engaged with the French ships in the waters.

Richard thrust his sword into the air and screamed, "***Wentworth!***" The call was taken up by all of the dragoons nearby as they cheered for their navy, taking heart in the knowledge that Eastbourne was not alone.

"Richard!" Darcy cried. "I must go to Elizabeth!"

Richard nodded his understanding, turned, and ran straight into the village, from where the screams of villagers and the crude shouts of the French could be heard.

Darcy and William turned and ran back to the beach and into the cave. “Elizabeth!” he screamed, as he made his way to the corridor. He had no choice but to leave her there before. He could hardly have taken her out onto a beach with him to fight three hundred or more invaders, but he could not go any farther without moving her to safety before the tide came in. He had been lucky that the cave was less likely to flood in the summer, but he would not risk Elizabeth’s safety any further.

“Elizabeth!” he shouted again, as he ripped the rags away from the opening of the small room in which she hid.

“Fitzwilliam!” she cried, throwing herself into his arms.

Elizabeth’s poor cousin had to witness her very enthusiastic first kiss uncomfortably, and after a moment, he shouted, “Oi! We’re in the middle of a battle here, Mr Darcy?”

Elizabeth could not help but to express a peal of laughter as they broke apart. “Apologies, Cousin!”

Darcy grasped Elizabeth’s hand and began to lead her out of the cave, picking up two muskets and checking that they were loaded, before handing them to Elizabeth, then handing a third to William. They came out onto the beach, picking their way around the bodies of the men who had fought and fallen there. The moon was very bright. The French had, of course, chosen to land on the full moon, the better to see what they were attacking.

As they left the beach and headed away from the village, Elizabeth pointed to a man heading to the shore, attempting to keep to the shadows. “Who do you suppose that is?” she asked.

Darcy instantly recognized the man known as Huggins, sneaking away to escape in the night. “Oh no, you do not,” he growled.

* * *

HUGUENIN HAD no idea what he should do. He was an intelligent man. He had the gift of languages, and could speak many dialects flawlessly without a hint of accent, or any trace of his roots. This had enabled him to come to the attention of

important men, and eventually, the Emperor. He had spent years working for Napoleon and his army, assuming false identities, and gathering intelligence.

This mission was something he had been investigating for years, tracing the whereabouts of a priceless artefact that had been stolen by the British in the year 1801 in the Battle of Alexandria. Many priceless relics had been taken, but this one had in turn been stolen from the British, disappearing somehow on the journey home. He had tracked it, and the one who was supposed to be dead, but instead was hiding it, to this god forsaken place. The jewel was so priceless that the Emperor had been willing to send twelve hundred men on a suicide mission to retrieve it. The mission would have gone so much easier if all of the French had landed instead of just one frigate. It would not have made a difference in the outcome, however. The jewel, and the one who hid it, had eluded him. He had no idea if the Emperor would be merciful. But he had a better chance on French soil than in England. He might even escape to Belgium.

Except that escape now seemed impossible. Out on the water, guns fired, and men screamed. The British Navy was out there. How did they find out? Who could have warned them? The idiot agent that had been sent to Eastbourne by the war office could not possibly have worked it out, and if he had, the information would only have gone as far as Spaulding. There was no frigate out there to row to now. There was only carnage on the water. Now there truly was no choice, he would have to escape into the English countryside, and attempt to obtain passage back home later through a smuggler's drop. He knew several men who would help him, though he would have to lay low somewhere remote for months before he even attempted it.

Suddenly, he heard a bugle. A damned British battle cry, heralding what appeared to be *another* damned company of dragoons, perhaps even two. He watched as scores of fresh men rode into the village, dismounting and leaving their horses nearby, then throwing themselves into the fighting.

* * *

ELIZABETH HID in the shadows as Darcy and William went after Huggins. There was an incredible fight, for the man refused to go willingly. There were several times that Elizabeth had to fight not to cry out at the villain's viciousness as he engaged Darcy with his own sword. Eventually Darcy forced the man back, where he tripped upon the legs of another man who lay dead, and struck his head on a stone going down, rendering him unconscious.

Mr Darcy and William Bennet made short work of tying the man's hands and lifting him up by his arms and dragging him between them. Elizabeth came out to them, the fighting had moved deeper into the village, and they had not seen any other Frenchmen this close to the water in several minutes.

"This man is one of the ringleaders, and we must secure him, but I cannot see how we can do so without risking Elizabeth's safety," said Darcy. "As a matter of fact, I cannot see how to get her anywhere safe without encountering the French as we attempt to move about. The town is overrun."

Suddenly, the door to a nearby cottage opened, and a woman hissed. "Madam! In 'ere, madam!" The party rushed over to the door, where a poor woman in her thirties looked out. "Madam, if ye need shelter so's the men can fight, ye can 'ide in 'ere."

Elizabeth looked at the woman, "I have seen your face before."

"Aye, I visit Bourne 'ouse fer the launderin," the lady said. "I heard o' yer kindness to poor Bella Tyler, that be good of yer people ta do that. Ye kin all 'ide 'ere if'n ye want."

"I cannot stay, I must fight with the men, but if Miss Bennet and Parson Bennet can stay here, I would be in your debt, madam," Darcy said. "Bennet, will you take charge of the prisoner until an authority can decide what to do with him?"

"Of course, and I will give my protection to the ladies," vowed William.

Darcy gave Elizabeth a soul searching look, then turned and vanished through the door. Elizabeth watched her cousin drag their prisoner inside the little cottage, where the woman had been hiding with her two children. William dumped the man in a corner, and proceeded to watch out the window.

“I thank you for the offer of shelter,” Elizabeth said to the lady. “What is your name?”

“I’m Mrs Hobley,” said the woman, drawing her youngest into her arms. “My John, ‘e’s out there fightin’ with the other men.”

“Let us pray for them,” Elizabeth said. From his post at the window, William led them in prayer for hours as they waited.

CHAPTER 54



The fighting raged all over Eastbourne for hours; things did not get quiet until the sky was turning grey with the dawn. Elizabeth had seen so many dead men on the beach and leading to the village just on her short journey to this cottage, and she was profoundly affected. Tears ran down her cheeks as she spent hours on her knees with Mrs Hobley and her children, praying for the safe deliverance of John Hobley and the other villagers. Elizabeth could not help but weep at the thought of all of the spinsters and widows who lived in the heart of the village, who had no husbands or even manservants to defend them.

Darcy and Richard returned for the prisoner as the sun was rising. Elizabeth threw herself into Darcy's arms as Mrs Hobley went to her front door and cried out, rushing to her husband, who was limping home to the small line of cottages with some other men. Darcy thanked the Hobileys for their assistance, and insisted on giving them a monetary reward for offering Elizabeth shelter and housing a prisoner. The Hobileys would not hear of any such thing, John Hobley referring to his gratitude for William's protection of his family. Darcy ignored all refusals, leaving a generous sum on their table as Richard and William dragged Huggins, who had still not regained consciousness, out of the front door.

They had not travelled more than a dozen steps before a man came charging out of the shadows, screaming at the top of his lungs. As the officer whom Richard had earlier called Spaulding lunged at Richard from behind with a dagger in his hand, William Bennet turned, raised the mace he had found by

the local man who had been killed, and protected his friend. With a powerful swing, the mace made contact with the side of Brigadier Spaulding's head. The result was too grotesque to be described, and Elizabeth cried out in horror at the scene.

William and Richard both stood in shock, Richard at the realisation that he had just nearly been stabbed in the back, and William, in shock that he had just taken a life. William rushed to the edge of the lane and was ill in the bushes, and Elizabeth rushed to bring him what comfort she was able. Darcy only looked at his cousin, as shocked as the others by what had nearly just happened.

* * *

ELIZABETH AND DARCY FOLLOWED RICHARD, William, and some of the other men to the beach, dragging Spaulding and Huggins behind them, where they met the mayor, Mr MacArthur. The cannonfire from the water had stopped some time ago, great cries of *HUZZAH* could be heard from the warships on the water, and there were two rowboats heading to shore. When they landed, Elizabeth learned that these boats conveyed Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft, who had hidden in the waters for some days along with a few other captains at the request of Richard. Croucher joined them with Tom Tyler, whom he had retrieved from the tower when it became safe enough to do so.

Introductions were being made when two men approached on horseback. One they all knew, the *Comte St Germain*. The other was known to Richard as the quartermaster general of the British Army. Richard and the other officers present saluted, and more introductions were made. The quartermaster general addressed Elizabeth.

“I have been told that you have been privy to some conversations that were not meant for your ears, but the details of which will assist us in identifying those of our own who are responsible for tonight's events, Miss Bennet,” he said. “I hope you will not mind if I call upon you for an interview.”

“Of course, sir,” Elizabeth assured the general. She then addressed St Germain. “*Monsieur le comte*, why did you leave

us? Where have you been all night?"

"Ah, *mademoiselle*, I apologise," answered the *comte*. "I was obligated to warn an old friend of the danger, and then I met my old acquaintance here as he and his men entered the town. I gave the good general a tour of the hideouts of these bad men who would plot against your country. Much information was found, and several men were arrested."

"When we met you, and you first visited Bourne House, you said you were here due to our country's stupidity," Elizabeth said. "If you knew something was to happen, why would you not have warned anyone?"

"Would anyone have believed me?" scoffed St Germain. "This is the third time I have visited this country to warn those here about the future, and I have been disbelieved every time. Even your good colonel here sent for help which never came, and he is one of you. I came to ensure the safety of an old friend, and to give what little help I am able."

"But how did you know something was to happen?" asked Darcy.

The *comte* smiled. "The future is merely a reflection of the past."

"How do you and the general know each other?" Elizabeth demanded curiously.

"I was one of the officers who watched and interrogated the *comte* the last time he was imprisoned in London, how many years ago now, *comte*, more than thirty?" The general shook his head and laughed, "You have not aged any more now than they said you did since you were here in the year 1760. You will understand, my old friend, that we know who the French were visiting, and we have a suspicion of what she is hiding. We will want to question you as to her whereabouts, before you disappear again."

"Of course," the *comte* smiled mysteriously. The general turned the conversation towards the naval men.

"As you know, there are many regiments training in Brighton every summer," said Admiral Croft with a wide

smile. “When we received the express from Colonel Fitzwilliam, I spoke to several colonels who were only too happy to lend us their men for what Wentworth and I described as *naval training manoeuvres*, and so we set out with our ships filled with fighters. We have had six warships hiding nearby for three days. They were completely unprepared for us. It was only too easy.”

“How are the villagers? Were many lost?” Elizabeth asked anxiously.

“I am very sad to say that many lives have been lost, and half of the village is burning,” answered Mr MacArthur. “Eastbourne has suffered grievously this night.”

“And the threat to the residents of Eastbourne has not passed,” said the general. “There is no way of knowing how many Frenchmen landed. We know only one frigate launched its men. A French frigate can carry three hundred to three hundred and fifty men, perhaps more. Any number of them could still be hiding in the village, or have escaped into the countryside. There shall have to be a curfew for some weeks, MacArthur.”

“Eastbourne will do whatever is required to keep our people safe. I am certain the war office will send whatever is required in the way of militia, to help protect us from any invaders who are left. It is only a shame that help did not arrive earlier.”

“It did, after a fashion,” said the general. “We received yours and Sir Charles Gordon’s letters, and sent Colonel Fitzwilliam here to investigate. Unfortunately, the brigadier in charge of supervising his mission reportedly turned traitor.”

“He was seen by young Tom Tyler delivering this packet to Colonel Fitzwilliam’s safehouse,” piped up Croucher, stepping forward and handing the packet to the general. “Two of your men accompanied us to retrieve it.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam briefed the general regarding how Spaulding’s head had come to be bashed in, as the general thumbed through the material in the packet. “This is enough

information to see you hanged, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Spaulding was serious in his mission to frame you.”

“He mentioned an old grudge of some kind against Lord Matlock,” said Darcy. “He was raving, and seemed nearly mad with revenge.”

“We had to hide all of the occupants of Bourne House at another location,” said Elizabeth. “He plotted to kill the foreign secretary’s entire family.”

“I heard the same plans while I was imprisoned by them,” agreed Darcy.

* * *

WHEN AS MUCH information as possible had been shared, Darcy found a carriage and escorted Elizabeth and William to Gordon Lodge, accompanied by a dozen dragoons on horseback. He firmly drew the shades of the carriage, insisting that Elizabeth had endured enough distress without seeing the devastation visited upon the town and its poor residents.

Jane, Mary, and Lydia flew down the stairs to the carriage the moment that Darcy handed Elizabeth down, and threw their arms around her, even as Darcy’s female relations threw themselves upon him. None in the house, nor indeed any of the houses in Eastbourne had slept that night, even the well protected homes. Even the houses well lit with torches that were not attacked were beset by the horror of the screams of the occupants of other nearby houses, or the rough shouts of the French travelling nearby. Thankfully, with Ashley’s early warning, all of the occupants and staff of Bourne House had been safely moved to Gordon Lodge before the landing.

Elizabeth sat in the drawing room and had tea with Lord and Lady Gordon and the occupants of Bourne House while hot water was heated for baths for all of those who had been out all night. Richard had only accompanied them for a bath and a shave, the quartermaster general advising him to see to his grooming before returning to his duties, lest he be taken for one of the French with his thick beard and unwashed appearance.

The ladies and the gentlemen exclaimed and cried out their distress as Elizabeth and the others described the events of the night. Sir Charles Gordon, now that he knew that there were officers all over Eastbourne, that the French had been mostly rounded up, and that his house was safe, kissed his wife and went into the village to do what he could to help. Before he left, he and Lady Gordon expressed their gratitude to Elizabeth, for her warning had not only allowed them to offer aid to Lord Carlisle's family in their hour of need, but also had enabled them to rush home and see to the safety of their house and children. They vowed to be her dearest friends and most devoted servants until their dying days.

Finally, after a cup of tea and a small sandwich, Elizabeth was swept upstairs by the ladies, given over to the ministrations of a grateful maid who had heard of what Elizabeth had done that night. She was plunged into a bath, then dressed in a nightgown provided by Lady Gordon, and after a hearty meal from a tray of breakfast sent up by the kitchens, fell into bed and did not wake until late that night.

CHAPTER 55



When Elizabeth woke, it was past midnight. She could not imagine ringing for a servant, but it would be some hours before anyone in the house woke. She had slept enough, at least for now. She sensed that perhaps she might lull herself back to sleep eventually, but she would need something to read for a few hours. She rose, lit a candle, and slipped into a pair of house slippers and a dressing gown thoughtfully provided by Lady Gordon, then slipped out of the door of her room.

She had visited the library at Gordon Lodge before, when paying a call on Lady Gordon. She made her way downstairs, and eventually found the room she was looking for. The library was not unoccupied. She spied Mr Darcy as she entered. He was sitting in the candlelight on a comfortable couch, with an enormous tray of food before him.

“Elizabeth!” he exclaimed as he jumped to his feet. “I am so grateful that you are here!”

“You are?” Elizabeth asked curiously, as she moved forward. “In the middle of the night?”

“I woke and thought of finding something to read,” explained Darcy. “I think we might be rather famous in the household, the footman in the hall of the guest wing told me that we are heroes, and that he had been instructed to feed us if we woke in the night, and see to all of our needs. He brought me far too much food. I hate to think there was anyone in the kitchens waiting for us to wake. I had to prevent him from

lighting a fire in late June in an effort to see to my comfort. Are you hungry?"

"Simply famished," Elizabeth admitted.

"Please, join me," Mr Darcy insisted. He went to a sideboard and procured another wine glass. "I do not know what the man was thinking. If I drank this entire carafe of mulled wine, I should have quite the aching head in the morning."

Elizabeth watched him as he made her a plate, filling it with the best cuts of cheese, the tenderest morsels of meat and bread, the plumpest and juiciest fruits. Feeling shy with him in such an intimate setting, she was quiet as they consumed their meal. After they had sated themselves, and after feeling the effects of a glass of mulled wine, she asked, "Is this what it will be like? When we are married."

"Lord, I hope so," he smiled at her beatifically. "Except that at Pemberley, it shall often be cold. At Pemberley we would have a roaring fire, the most luxurious furs – and each other's company – to warm us. At Pemberley, or in our London home, we may enjoy ourselves in this manner in any room we chuse. The library, the music room, or our private parlour. Or perhaps on any of the many terraces. Or in the gardens. We will have many nights like this... no. Far better and infinitely more comfortable. Not due to any lack of hospitality on the part of our hosts, of course. But because we will be in our own home, and perfectly at ease with one another."

"And our morning walks?" Elizabeth asked. "Will we enjoy those as well?"

"At Pemberley, we shall enjoy morning walks and views such as you have never seen," he promised. "I cannot wait to show you our home. You will love it as I do, and Pemberley and its people shall love you, as I do."

"Our home? Is that a proposal?" Elizabeth asked.

Darcy quickly moved from her side on the couch to kneel in front of her on the floor. "Elizabeth Bennet, you are the

bravest, the kindest, most intelligent and incredible woman of my acquaintance,” he said heatedly. “From the moment we met, I have been in awe of your strength and character. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you. Will you be my wife?”

Elizabeth, moved to tears of joy by his speech, threw her arms around his neck as she gave her emphatic answer. The couple enjoyed a far more passionate kiss than the one they had exchanged in the cave, but Darcy was gentlemanly, and did not impose upon her. The pair sat for two more hours, planning their future and exchanging chaste kisses, until they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

* * *

SOMETIME JUST AFTER DAWN, Elizabeth and Darcy woke to find her cousin William in a chair near them. Elizabeth’s little gasp disturbed him, and he woke with a start and then grinned at Elizabeth.

“William! What on earth are you doing here?” asked Elizabeth in surprise.

“What time is it? Six? I came down hoping to find a book of sermons or history perhaps two hours ago and found you here. Decided to do some reading here instead of in my room, to protect my cousin’s reputation a bit, you don’t mind, do you Darcy? A footman, an eager young chap, brought me a cup of tea and a muffin. Somehow I managed to persuade him that I would rather wait until breakfast for a larger meal.” William grinned at her. “Do you have anything to announce, Cousin?”

“Perhaps, but it can wait until breakfast,” said Elizabeth decidedly. Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley had both received permission from her father to propose whenever they deemed themselves ready, so they could make their announcement as soon as they chose. Such an announcement, however, ought to be followed by a swift express to Longbourn, to inform Elizabeth’s family as soon as possible.

“We should go upstairs, *with our books*, as soon as possible. The family may or may not be up, but the servants are certainly about by now,” said William practically.

They all went upstairs, past the footman in the hall, and to their rooms. Elizabeth rang for the maid, bathed, and dressed in one of her gowns, which had been brought already from Bourne House, which her maid informed her had been ransacked, but at least no one was hurt. She then descended the stairs for breakfast. She entered to find most of the occupants of the house in the breakfast room, save Arabella, Lord Carlisle, and Lady Gordon. Jane and Mr Bingley were entering the breakfast room from the doors leading to the garden.

“Lizzy!” Jane threw her arms around Elizabeth, leaving Mr Bingley. “I hope you will not mind our haste, but before Mr Darcy disappears again, Mr Bingley and I are engaged!”

“I cannot fault you for haste, Jane, for Mr Darcy and I are also engaged,” Elizabeth said happily, amidst the exclamations and congratulations of their family and their host. Once the ladies had all been seated and served by the gentlemen, and the men had taken their seats by the ladies, the company spoke of the weddings for a few moments, then the discussion turned to the news from the village.

A great many people had been interrogated and interviewed. Lord Carlisle and Lady Gordon had already been interviewed about what Elizabeth had said just before the invasion, but the general naturally wished to hear Elizabeth’s story. Though he had Richard’s version of what he had observed for many weeks, as well as Darcy’s, the general wished to hear Elizabeth’s account of the conversation she had overheard outside Lord Amesbury’s study before the man was arrested. So far, no outward suggestion of suspicion had been cast on Lords Amesbury, Bexley, or Lennox, nor Colonel Allen. The general was waiting for the accounts of Elizabeth and Darcy before these particular arrests were made. He was to visit Gordon Lodge late this morning. There was no other proper account of the conversation at the ball because to no one’s surprise, the *Comte St Germain* had disappeared, leaving no trace of his existence behind in his fashionable rented rooms.

Elizabeth learned that the elderly woman who had hid her and fed Darcy had been found sitting on a large rock on the shore the day before. It was unknown if she was French or English. The poor woman had no tongue. It was unknown when it had been cut out other than that it had not been recent. She did not seem to be able to write, and her faculties seemed vague. Darcy volunteered to pay for her to be housed somewhere that she would be watched over carefully, but compassionately housed. Everyone felt that she was too old and vague to be punished for the crimes of the French.

Huggins, known on the continent and by a great number of British intelligence officers as Huguenin, had regained consciousness and had been questioned, but so far had refused to speak. He had already been transported to London for interrogation, after which, he would be tried, and most likely hanged. He showed no remorse for the plight of the town, nor for the death of his nephew, Mr Wickham.

The entire southern coast and all of the towns for miles around were to be placed under a curfew for several weeks, until the militia was certain no more of the escaped French lingered in the country. All residents must be inside their homes by dark each evening. All outbuildings must be locked up and checked each day. An enormous search was mounted. Only the army was allowed to conduct it. They did not want any angry mobs stringing up innocent travellers. The search was conducted over and over for weeks.

The town had lost many who had lived there, and also some visitors from other places. Small homes and cottages that had no man servants were massacred, and entire families were lost. As Elizabeth had feared, the spinster and widow population in the market town were deeply affected. Mrs Thornborrow, Miss Basset, and Miss Jennings had all been murdered in their homes, along with the maids who lived with them. The Misses Jenkins, Miss Pole, and Mrs Forrester had sought sanctuary, and found it, at the home of the Widow Davis, after following Miss Pole, who was armed with an army cutlass, through the streets, and somehow they had all been spared.

* * *

A WEEK LATER, Colonel Allen and Lords Amesbury, Lennox, and Bexley had been arrested. Elizabeth told her story and was considered to be the heroine of the town. The men were sent to London to be tried, and it was certain that they would all be hanged and their families stripped of their titles and property. Lady Amesbury had taken her own life when she realised the extent of her husband's perfidy. No one even knew where their younger, unmarried sons were. They had understandably fled London when the news appeared in the papers.

The entire town was in mourning with so many lost. Several large funerals were held, and the Bishop of Sussex travelled to Eastbourne from the cathedral in Chichester to conduct them himself. Every lady in Eastbourne wore black, whether they had lost family or not. It was agreed by the entire community that there would be no evening engagements, but that ladies would continue to call upon one another, for they were all mourning, and otherwise there would be no calls or condoling at all.

Job Tyler had appeared immediately in the village once his son's heroism became known, and it was immediately apparent that the man intended to cash in on his son's fame. It did not last long. Though the town was grateful to Tom Tyler, and showed it, they paid him very little attention when his father was present in the village, as they were used to doing in the past. Job Tyler's nature had been apparent to all for many years. In the absence of any sufficiently grand rewards, Job Tyler turned again to poaching. He needed some ready coin, and when he stole four brace of pheasant, three of snipe, from Sir and Lady Gordon's land, Croucher and Richard were ready to do something about the man, at Georgiana Darcy's special request.

Sir Gordon could not act as magistrate in this matter, and so Richard and Croucher ensured that this time, no mercy was shown to Job Tyler. So many times had the man been let go because he had such a large family to feed, but they pointed out to the judge that the man did not feed his family anyway. His son, a strapping boy with a good pair of leather boots, had

already distinguished himself as a hero of the invasion, and already provided better for the family with hardly any effort at all. Job Tyler was sentenced to transportation. He would never return from Australia, freeing his wife and children from his cruel and controlling ways. The town of Eastbourne thanked Tom Tyler for his service the night of the invasion with the gift of a small three bedroom cottage near the edge of the village, one of the brand new constructions built to replace what had burned. Tom gratefully accepted gifts of cloth, blankets, furniture, and crockery for his family without consulting his mother, who, being so used to obeying Job, said nothing, for she did not know how to fight.

* * *

TWO WEEKS AFTER THE INVASION, a grand carriage bearing the crest of Matlock pulled into the crescent in front of Bourne House, accompanied by an enormous party of armed guards and more than two dozen officers. When the *comte* disappeared, Anne had been afraid that her mother would not go through with her operation, but a delivery had been made to the surgeon of the sedative, with instructions on how to use it, and two deliveries, one per week, with several little bottles of elixir each had also been made to Bourne House. Lady Catherine was careful once the family returned to Bourne House, to eat well and preserve her strength.

Lord Matlock had come hence to be close when his sister had her procedure, and to condole with the residents of Eastbourne who had lost so much because a man had wanted revenge on him so badly. It had not been made public, everything that Spaulding had said in the cave, but Matlock recalled the incident from years ago keenly. It had not pleased him to make the decision that he had made at the time, but he had done what he thought was best. Seeing now the consequences of that choice pained him greatly. He met with the mayor, with the magistrate, and attended a special memorial with the residents of the town for those who were lost.

He was most impressed by the stories of Elizabeth, William Bennet, and Tom Tyler. These three people were from

what one might consider unremarkable origins. One a young lady unschooled in the ways of the world and of war, the next a clergyman, well meaning, but unsure of himself as a gentleman, the last a mere child, a poor squatter's son, half starved and illiterate. The three of them had shown bravery far and beyond what could ever possibly have been expected of them. Elizabeth's quick thinking had set in motion the rescue of his own family, and the salvation of the town. Mr William Bennet's determination and bravery had not only prevented the landing of three more frigates filled with men, but saved the life of Matlock's second son, and the sheer nerve and outstanding courage of Tom Tyler had warned the entire south coast of the impending danger, mobilising naval fleets and military operations across the southern end of the country, as well as waking the town, and giving the residents enough warning that they might fight back.

Lord Matlock spoke to many townspeople about the good intentions, willingness, and intelligence of Tom Tyler, and decided that a cottage was insufficient reward for such a highly individual and clever boy. When Matlock interviewed Tom and asked him what he would do if he were rich, Tom answered that he would build a school in Eastbourne which all of the children could attend. Well pleased with the boy's response, Lord Matlock rewarded Tom with twenty-five thousand pounds from his own purse, to be kept in the percents until the boy was twenty five years of age. Arrangements were made for Tom to be tutored by the local vicar, along with his younger brother and sister. Arrangements for the other siblings would be considered as the children grew old enough. The mayor was made responsible for the administration of the interest of Tom's fortune, ensuring that the Tylers were respectably housed, but that no funds were wasted.

Three weeks after the invasion, Lady Catherine de Bourgh had her procedure. It was carried out in a room at Bourne House that had been specially prepared. Her family and the entire party waited downstairs. Anne wept much of the time, which exhausted the poor girl, for it took hours. When the surgeons finally appeared to say that Lady Catherine had

tolerated the procedure without going into any medical distress, and that though she would be in considerable pain when she woke, that the surgeons were hopeful that she would heal quickly and without infection.

It was hoped that the tumour would not return for years, if at all. Anne broke down and wept again with relief.

CHAPTER 56



On the first of September, Mr Darcy handed Elizabeth and Lydia Bennet down from his carriage in front of Longbourn, followed by his sister. Mary, Jane, and William had returned to Meryton with the Bingleys a fortnight after Lady Catherine's operation, when it was apparent that the lady would make a full recovery. Lord and Lady Matlock returned to London on the same day; Lord Matlock needed to return to the capital after such a long absence, and also after such an event on home shores. There would be new hostilities between England and France after this, and the foreign secretary was needed without further delay. Elizabeth, Lydia, Georgiana, and Priscilla had remained in Eastbourne with Lady Catherine for another month, then accompanied her back to Rosings Park with Anne, and stayed with them for another week.

The Woodhouses stayed in Eastbourne until Lady Catherine and her guests left the village, then travelled to London, despite the heat at the end of the summer, to visit Miss Woodhouse's sister. Elizabeth and Darcy had no more of Miss Woodhouse's opinions of Darcy's matrimonial prospects once Priscilla, Anne, and Georgiana cornered her and informed her that if she did not wish for tales of her lies and false illness to be spread all over London, that she would learn to mind her business and be respectful of the Bennets and their relations. Emma and Elizabeth would never become what Elizabeth considered close, but Elizabeth was resigned to seeing her occasionally, both in Highbury, while visiting Charlotte, and also possibly in the company of Lady

Catherine, for that lady and Mr Woodhouse seemed to be becoming inseparable.

Mary and Mrs Bennet had their way. Mrs Bennet was beside herself in her determination to have not a double, but a triple wedding! The neighbourhood had never seen such a spectacle, and though Jane was still insistent in her refusal not to steal Mary's special day, Mary and William were very vocal about the notion only increasing their joy and that of their family and friends. William was able to convince Bingley and Darcy of the merits of such an idea, and the other men persuaded their ladies to agree. None of them wished to wait very long, in any case.

Elizabeth had avoided returning to Meryton for as long as possible in an effort to avoid the wedding preparations and the endless fittings her mother would demand of her. She, Jane, and Mary managed to have their wedding gowns completed in Eastbourne, and so now there were only the endless rounds of visits their mother would insist upon to their neighbours before the wedding, which was to be held in just over a fortnight. The novelty of William Bennet, the hero, had begun to lose its shine in Meryton, but the arrival of Elizabeth and Darcy brought renewed interest in the tales of the invasion, and Mrs Bennet meant to enjoy the attention for all that it was worth.

The day after their arrival, a delivery was made to Longbourn. Elizabeth entered the hall to find her father accepting three parcels from a man who was familiar to her.

"Denomme!" she cried. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"A wedding gift for the *mademoiselles*," the servant answered. He declined to stay long enough to take a meal in the kitchen, nor even allow the ladies to open the gifts and send letters of thanks. "I will convey your thanks to the *comte*," Denomme promised, and departed.

An hour later, Elizabeth, Mary, and Jane were in the drawing room in the company of their beaux and their family as they simultaneously opened the boxes. Everyone gasped at the sight of the jewels inside. Each box held a positively enormous pendant on a gold chain, and a pair of matching

cufflinks. Each stone was a solitary jewel the size of a large chicken's egg, set in simple gold. Each was a different shape. The one addressed to Mary was a heart shaped garnet. Jane's was an oval sapphire. Elizabeth's was an emerald cut citrine. The jewels in the cufflinks matched the pendants perfectly, and were as large as the pad of a man's thumb.

The family was hushed as they all stared at the incredible gifts with wonder. "Why on earth would the *comte* send you such gifts?" Mr Bennet demanded.

"He is a strange creature," Darcy answered. "He claims to make them himself, through alchemy, of course."

"He had a funny habit of choosing what he considered to be *the perfect jewel* for each lady of his acquaintance," Elizabeth said. "One night during a dance, he amused me by speculating the perfect jewels for the ladies in the room. He told me that mine was citrine."

None in Meryton really knew who the Count of St Germain was. Her father had read several accounts of the man's previous detentions in London, but otherwise, the good people of the quiet country village had never heard of such a person, other than his name being mentioned many times in the tales of the attempted invasion of Eastbourne. As far as their neighbours were concerned, he was an important visiting French nobleman, perhaps an emigre from the revolution, and the Bennets had been otherwise taken in by fantastical tales as to the rest.

The wedding breakfast was to be held at Netherfield, due to the size. Mrs Bennet had been in close contact with Lady Matlock and Lady Catherine, and though it was not meant to be a great society event, it would not do for the foreign secretary's nephew to marry, and not have certain nobles who were close to the family invited. Darcy and Bingley had refused Elizabeth and Jane's dowries, doubling the size of Kitty's and Lydia's.

Mrs Bennet had spent a fortune on the arrangements, and Bennet had quietly humoured her. It was true that the Bennets' consequence had grown considerably the last ten months, and

since they were not having three weddings, he allowed the breakfast to be three times as grand. His daughter was to be related to the foreign secretary, he would not allow it to appear as if her family were poor, even if he would be obligated to curb his wife's spending immediately after the event. It had helped that Darcy and Bingley had persuaded him that the necessary wardrobes that Elizabeth and Jane needed would be so grand that it only made sense for their husbands to assume that expense, so he *had* saved a fortune on clothes.

Darcy, Bingley, and Bennet had made the wedding present of Bartholomew, the pony, and the little trap to Mary and William shortly before the wedding. The couple was overwhelmed by such gifts, particularly after Sir Henry had renovated the parsonage for them. Mr Bingley promised care for Bartholomew and the pony in Netherfield's stable for the duration of his lease, which was very nearly over, but Sir Henry informed them that his nephew would be leaving the militia and coming to take up learning how to manage the estate, and that the horse and pony could continue to lodge there until they took up their place at Longbourn.

After the wedding breakfast, Elizabeth and Darcy would travel to London for a week, then to Pemberley for the harvest. When the harvest was complete, they would take a small journey to a small cottage in Hampshire that Darcy's parents had used often when they wished to holiday alone together.

Jane and Bingley would go to his house in Grosvenor Square for a week, then to Scarborough for a month alone in a snug cottage – Bingley believed Darcy's idea was capital – and another month visiting Bingley's relatives. Louisa would close Netherfield for them, and open the Great House at Stoke. When the couple returned, they would live there for a year under lease while they decided whether to purchase or find a different estate further north. Caroline and the Hursts would travel to Bingley's House in London, where they would participate in the upcoming season, where Caroline was very much looking forward to participating in society, while on her best behaviour, of course. Their months in town would give Jane and Charles some space in which to get used to each other, and their new situation.

Mary and William had declined all offers for visits to snug cottages. Their weeks in Eastbourne had been enough. Mr and Mrs Gardiner were to visit Longbourn for a week with their children, and the young couple would travel to London in their trap and stay in the Gardiners' House in Gracechurch Street for that time, before returning to Meryton and taking up the work of their parish together.

CHAPTER 57



The day of the wedding, the village was alive with excitement. Last minute deliveries were made to both Netherfield and Longbourn all morning. The servants had barely slept the night before with the excitement of making everything perfect for this most special day for the eldest Miss Bennets. Elizabeth was caught sneaking down the stairs for her morning walk shortly after dawn, and plunged instead into a steaming bath scented with sweet orange oils, where she was left to soak for a half hour before Hill and Betsey were upon her, scrubbing her from head to toe as if she had just been rescued from a life in the East End of London.

When she had been released from the bath and dried, the bath was scrubbed until the copper shone, and more water was ready for Jane. Elizabeth spent an hour sipping chocolate, and enjoying a breakfast of rare fruits and more, sent by Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley, who had heard that brides and grooms alike were often too nervous to eat on their wedding day, and so they provided an array of tempting delicacies. The spread included assorted pineapples, melons, cherries, peaches, plums, and grapes, purchased from the hothouses of the rich, and delivered to Meryton for the purpose. There was another such spread downstairs for the rest of the family on the sideboard in the breakfast room. There was also a tray of meats, eggs, and cheeses, plum cakes, hot rolls, and scones with marmalade.

The other maid, Sarah, filed Elizabeth's nails as she ate, then set to arranging her hair, as Jane left the bath and entered the dressing room with Elizabeth. This series of events was

repeated with Mary, and the three brides were pampered and beautified for some hours before their mother deemed them ready, and the last touches, the jewels, were added to the effect.

Jane looked stunning in her Maria Luisa blue gown with the matching norman cap and incredible oval sapphire. Elizabeth was likewise a vision in her gown of rose silk and norman cap, with the impressively large citrine, and Mary was magnificent in her white satin with red trimming and sempstress bonnet. The enormous heart shaped garnet at her throat would become an important Bennet heirloom that the family would pass down for many generations.

It had never been considered possible that Lydia might be anything but striking in the parma violet, and she accepted their compliments and their thanks for her part in the discovery of the bonnets and yard goods. The brides were gratified indeed by the impressive sight of Mrs Bennet in her turban and seafoam green silk, as well as Kitty, in her amber satin. They had been the perfect gifts for their mother and sister, and Mrs Bennet preened under their flattery. Mr Bennet had decided that it was proper for the mother of the brides to have something fine, and so Mr Darcy had assisted him in procuring a most impressive set of pearls for their station, at quite an affordable price. His wife glowed with happiness, and Bennet was happy for her. All of her dreams were coming true on this day.

Mrs Bennet and her two youngest daughters departed for the church in the Bennet carriage while the brides followed in Georgiana Darcy's carriage with Mr Bennet. The entire neighbourhood was out, everyone who had been invited, and everyone who had not. The tenants and villagers cheered for their Miss Bennets as they passed. Everyone was prodigiously proud of Elizabeth, Darcy, and William, and all of their neighbours were elated that their neighbourhood was, once again, distinguished by a visit from the foreign secretary and his wife.

Mr Bennet had his hands full walking three brides down the aisle, but he managed the task and joined his wife, who

already sobbed with joy in their pew. Bennet was solemn as he watched his three eldest daughters say their vows. He had once considered them his three worthiest daughters, but perhaps he had been mistaken. Catherine had blossomed with both of her parent's undivided attention this summer, and his youngest had come home with a harp, an expensive one no less, then had distinguished herself in the neighbourhood by playing it creditably. Now that his wife's worst fears were laid to rest, the two of them could settle down to educating their two youngest and polishing them up to join their sisters in society. His wife was not wrong. The marriages of Jane and Elizabeth *would* throw Catherine and Lydia into the paths of other rich men.

All three brides and all three grooms each remembered the wedding as a blur. They were all so stimulated by their nerves, their hopes, and their happiness that none could even remember the ceremony, though it was certain that Mrs Bennet and her friends had all memorised every detail, to be expounded upon at length once the excitement was over. Mr Bennet smiled. Whatever the fates of their two youngest, his wife could live on the memories of this day for the rest of her life.

The brides and grooms burst out of the church, followed by the guests, as the villagers threw rice and grain. They boarded their carriages and the men joyfully threw coins to the children as they pulled away from the church. The couples each had a moment or two to themselves as they travelled to meet the rest of the party for the wedding breakfast at Netherfield.

* * *

THREE HOURS LATER, Elizabeth approached Darcy in the drawing room at Netherfield. "Have you seen my father?" she asked her husband. "I wished to say goodbye before we leave."

Darcy had not seen Mr Bennet in some time, though he had not paid very close attention to his father-in-law this afternoon. He happily followed his bride from room to room in search of her father. His mother-in-law had contentedly spent

her day in the company of her friends from Meryton, as well as Lady Matlock, and Lady Catherine. She was easy enough to find, but she had no notion of the whereabouts of her husband. William and Mary were talking to Mr Elton, who had stood up with William at the wedding. Richard had of course stood up with Darcy, and Mr Hurst had good naturedly agreed to stand up with Mr Bingley.

They encountered the Woodhouses. Miss Woodhouse had recently become engaged on a visit to her sister in London, to a Mr Tom Bertram, the heir to a baronetcy from Northamptonshire. She said that his father was a very proper person, though she longed to marry quickly and take this Mansfield Park in hand. It was said that Lady Bertram was too mild a woman, and that her sister, the local vicar's wife, was practically in control of all that went on there.

“Someone simply must take his ghastly sisters in hand,” Emma confessed to Anne and Priscilla. “There is a mousy little cousin that lives there as well who desperately wants some attention. I am eager to begin putting things in order.”

They approached the Knightleys, and Elizabeth could not have been happier than to hide in a corner and speak intimately with Charlotte for a half hour some time earlier. The Knightleys were expecting an addition to their family in February or March, and this would be the last time they travelled before then. Charlotte assured her that she had settled in well in Highbury, that the society was small, but warm and well-meaning. The knowledge that Miss Woodhouse's return to the community would be temporary only increased Charlotte's enjoyment of the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, Miss Woodhouse was no less a snob than she had been, and on her recent visit to Highbury, had snubbed Charlotte quite scandalously. Mr Knightley was still incensed at his old friend for her behaviour.

Everyone was asked, none had seen Mr Bennet in at least an hour. Elizabeth and Darcy went into the hall and saw none other than Denomme guarding the door of the study. “Denomme!” cried Elizabeth.

“*Madame*, you must rescue the *comte*, he has been the hostage of your father for nearly an hour,” Denomme pleaded. “Our time runs short, we must leave soon. I go to prepare our departure, you will tell the *comte*.”

Elizabeth and Darcy entered the study where Mr Bennet had been questioning the Count of St Germain regarding his historical knowledge for some time. “*Monsieur le comte!*” exclaimed Darcy, bowing, then shaking the man’s hand. “Welcome! We just met *Monsieur Denomme* in the hall, he wishes us to inform you that he is preparing your departure.”

“*Bonjour, Monsieur D’Arcy,*” said St Germain, rising from his seat.

“*Monsieur*, please allow us to thank you for the magnificent wedding gifts.” Elizabeth curtsied. “My sisters and their husbands will wish to thank you as well.”

“I require no thanks, brides as lovely as yourself require such things on their wedding day.” The *comte* shook his head, refusing more effusions of gratitude. “I told you – the citrine – did I not?”

“You most certainly did!” Elizabeth laughed. “I confess I am excessively fond of the colour.”

Suddenly, William and Mary entered. “We just glimpsed Denomme slipping outside, so we knew you were hiding somewhere!” Mary exclaimed. “Thank you, *monsieur*, for the beautiful wedding gifts.”

“And for your unexampled kindness to my wife,” said William. “You helped my Mary’s dreams come true with your kind assistance at the instrument, and you will always have my gratitude.”

“We come to bid you farewell before leaving these shores,” said the *comte*. “And to show you what the French came for that night. You have, I think, earned the right to know.” He turned, revealing, seated behind him, an elderly woman of perhaps seventy. “*Monsieur, Madame D’Arcy*, Mr and Mrs Bennet, may I introduce *Jeanne du Barry*.”

“*Madame du Barry!*” gasped Elizabeth curtsying to the lady. “But she was killed-”

“In Paris? That is the story that is told, and many believe it,” said the woman. She was incredibly beautiful despite her age. Her hair was set in thick grey ringlets, and her almond shaped blue eyes were arresting in the setting of her heart-shaped face. “One of my ladies in waiting was my half-sister, and she shared my looks. They mistook her for me, and we could not save her.”

Their party listened in awe as *Madame du Barry* told her harrowing story. “Once my sister had been killed in her attempt to help me get people out of France, it was decided that I had an opportunity to disappear. Rather than to travel notoriously in exile across the warring continent, we thought that perhaps I might go to England,” she said. “Even so, it was years before I could escape France. A crossing was too perilous to be sensible in wartime. It was not until the British defeated Napoleon in the year 1801 that I could cross, and then only because there was a priceless object that must be taken away and hidden. Then, a boat was provided for me, and a castle was purchased, so that this object might hide safely in England until the true king returns to the throne. Though *ma bien-aimée’s* son banished me from court, I will save this for his heirs.”

Madame du Barry opened a case which was in her lap, revealing an incredible stone. “This emerald was said to be owned by Cleopatra. It was obtained by Louis XIV in the year 1661. It is so priceless that it was one of the few jewels *ma bien-aimée* did not boast of, for fear it would be stolen. This is a jewel worth sending men into battle for.”

The emerald was enormous, nearly eight inches high, it was sculpted and polished into the shape of a womanly figure. “Cleopatra was said to believe that she was the living embodiment of the Goddess Isis, and that she sometimes had emeralds carved in her form, to be given as gifts to other rulers,” Thomas Bennet said in awe, “But I have never heard an account of one this large. If an emerald this large came from anywhere, it would be from *her* mines.”

“The British took this stone, and it was intended to travel to England with the Rosetta Stone, and all of the other relics stolen by Napoleon,” said *Madame du Barry*. “But our people, the resistance, stole it back. There was only one place the English would never think to look for it.”

“England,” Elizabeth breathed.

The old woman nodded, “*Exactement.*”

“The Emperor learned of the location of the jewel from the spy, Huguenin,” said St Germain. “The sale of this stone could restore the King of France to some semblance of wealth, were he to return to the throne. The possession of this stone would distinguish Napoleon amongst other rulers. It is time for the jewel to hide again, until it can be restored to the royal family.”

“What is *your* true interest here?” asked Elizabeth. When the *comte* raised a brow, she continued. “It cannot just be a good deed.”

The *comte* smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “It has a flaw.”

“The stone?” Elizabeth and Darcy said simultaneously, peering closer at the jewel.

The *comte* nodded. “I think I can remove the flaw, it would make it even more priceless.”

Thomas Bennet laughed. “All of that, and your only interest is scientific?”

“The quest for perfection is endless, whether in stones or in souls. Yet perhaps what we call perfection is simply the reflection of the infinite within each,” replied the *comte* mysteriously. “There is also to consider the safety of my old friend,” he nodded to *Madame du Barry*. “Her lover played the generous host to me many times. The least I could do is escort his lady to safety.”

“How gallant,” said Elizabeth. She wanted to like the *comte*. And considering the remarkable gifts he had bestowed upon her and her husband, she felt that she *ought* to like him. But it was often difficult to sense if he was truly a friend, or if

he might not also be a bit of a villain. It was obvious that her father and husband felt the same. Elizabeth suspected that the man had played both parts many times in his life, and that the lines of good and wicked might be rather blurred for a man of his supposed age and experience.

“We should depart,” announced *Madame*, rising to her feet. “Our time has been much occupied by *Madame D’Arcy’s* curious *pepe*.” Suddenly there was a frantic knocking on the door. Darcy went and opened the door a crack and peered out.

“Darcy, I know he is in there,” growled Lord Matlock. “I *will* speak with him!” Darcy was not in the habit of standing in his uncle’s path. He stepped back to allow his uncle into the room, and the rest of the party turned back to find empty chairs, and an empty room.

“I’ll be damned,” Thomas Bennet exclaimed as he rushed to the open door that adjoined the library to the study, finding no one on the other side. “Downright *uncanny!*”

* * *

ELIZABETH DARCY ROLLED over the next morning to gaze upon her sleeping husband. Much had happened to her since the *comte’s* and his guest’s most recent disappearance, and the fact that Lord Matlock had turned Netherfield and the surrounding area upside down without a trace of the *comte* or *Madame du Barry*, was the least interesting of it all.

Perhaps a half hour after the departure of the *comte*, a messenger accompanied by the Royal Guard arrived at the wedding breakfast with four invitations for the heroes of Eastbourne. Elizabeth, Darcy, Richard, and William opened the missives and stared at one another in front of all of their guests.

“It is an invitation to St James for an event in our honour in one week’s time,” said Elizabeth, to the surprise of her parents and all of the wedding guests.

“I am to be *elevated!*” gasped William in disbelief. “*Elevated to baronet!*”

“*What?*” shouted his wife and father-in-law, tripping over themselves and each other in their haste to see for themselves.

“So am I,” said Darcy and Richard simultaneously.

“I am to receive the Regent’s Cross¹,” said Elizabeth.

“How about that,” said Matlock, taking his son’s invitation and skimming over it. “I knew about the Regent’s Cross. You are all to receive it, save Richard. He shall receive a military medal and a promotion as well as this elevation. Good for you, son. I could not be more proud.”

“What the devil is the Regent’s Cross?” demanded Bennet. “I have never heard of it!

“It is a brand new medal, created specifically to award the heroes of Eastbourne, and those thereafter who exceed expectations in regards to their civic duty,” Matlock explained. “It is for civilians who demonstrate bravery and selflessness for king and country. I believe Tom Tyler will receive it as well.”

“I knew how it would be when I heard that our Lizzy and our William were heroes!” crowed Mrs Bennet, quite understandably. “How grand my daughters will be! Lady Darcy! Lady Bennet! How well that sounds!”

* * *

I WONDER how Jane’s night was, Elizabeth wondered as Fitzwilliam’s fluttering eyelashes returned her to the present. Her husband woke and smiled to find her watching him. He wordlessly pulled her back into his arms, and Elizabeth forgot about her sister, medals, elevations, and everything else for some days.

The End

¹ The Regent’s Cross is a completely fictional medal created for this story because there were not suitable awards for civilians at this time.

EPILOGUE



*E*astbourne 1826

LADY ELIZABETH DARCY waited in the front of the crowd with her husband and her sisters for the ribbon to be cut at the opening of Eastbourne's new school. Mr MacArthur was no longer mayor. He had made way for Mr Johnson, the owner of the general store, who stepped forward to make a speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen, fourteen years ago, Eastbourne was attacked. We lost many, and for a time after, we suffered through the grief and rebuilding together. One of our heroes was a young man, just a boy in the year 1812, and it was due to his bravery that the coast and the town was warned. His reward was his education, and the provision for his future, which he has seen to admirably. There is another here, who would like to say a few words about Mr Tyler. Ladies and gentlemen, may I present, Sir William Bennet.”

There was polite applause as Elizabeth's cousin William took his place next to Mr Johnson. “Tom Tyler was nearly twelve when I met him, and a brighter or more likely young chap you were never probable to meet. It seemed to me that he was more than his origins, that there was something special about this lad, and I was not wrong. On that fateful night in June of 1812, an unlikely bunch of us took it upon ourselves to do what we could to save the town of Eastbourne and our friends. Lady Darcy, naught but a slip of an unwed girl, put in motion the events which saved the lives of our foreign secretary's family, and she even infiltrated the caves where the

villains operated, and shot one. I, naught but a humble parson, ran for the cliffs to stop the fireworks, and prevented more than one French ship from landing. Perhaps the least likely of us was Tom Tyler. A squatter's child who was still learning to walk in a man's boots, Tom breached the Wish Tower and set the scene none of us will ever forget, lighting the beacons, warning the south coast, and then rang the tower bell, alerting the town.

“Eastbourne burned that night. The fires of the homes which were attacked burned as brightly as any coastal beacon, and the lives that were lost can never be replaced, but the town, and our country will forever be beholden to Tom Tyler for his bravery. When our foreign secretary asked Tom a fortnight later what he would do if he were a wealthy man, Tom answered that he would build a grammar school in Eastbourne for children of all stations. Impressed, Lord Matlock rewarded Tom with a sum of money in trust to provide for him and his family, and arranged for his education. Tom never forgot his dream, and that is why we are standing here today.

“I do not believe I was ever as proud of another person as I was the day I stood next to Tom Tyler and our friends at St James to be recognized for our deeds by the Prince Regent, and that pride has only grown as I have watched him become a man. Today, I am very happy to witness Tom's dream become a reality as we officially open the Battle of Eastbourne Memorial Grammar School!” The applause was deafening as Tom Tyler stepped forward and shook hands with William and Mr Johnson, then took a pair of scissors that was handed to him, and cut the ribbon. The crowd surged forward as the young man shook hands and accepted congratulations from his community.

Elizabeth pressed closer to Darcy as they and their friends and relations watched Mr Tyler laugh and talk with his village, who was tremendously proud of his achievement. Tom had never attended a grammar school himself. He received his education from the vicar, but when he approached the age of seventeen, it was decided that he was too bright not to attend university, and so he went to Oxford to read the law. Upon

leaving the university, he had accepted a position working for the local solicitor, Mr Aldridge. He had assumed control of his fortune from Lord Matlock the year before, and immediately set about building a new school, aided by generous endowments from Sir and Lady Darcy, Sir Richard Fitzwilliam, Lord Carlisle/now Matlock, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Lady Catherine had not the good fortune to see the school finished, for she had sadly passed away only two months previously.

* * *

ELIZABETH LOOKED DOWN at her medal. She did not wear it often. Only when visiting court every few years, though they had all brought out their medals today. Some days, she was so busy with her rambunctious family that she mostly forgot that she had the thing.

The ceremony was followed by a reception at the home of Sir and Lady Gordon, with whom Elizabeth had maintained a friendship with for all of those years. Elizabeth accepted a cup of tea in her friend's drawing room as she and her husband chatted with their friends and relations. Jane and Mr Bingley were present, as was Mrs Bennet, who lived with them at the Great House at Stoke. Mary and William were in conversation with Kitty, Lydia, and their husbands. Ashley Fitzwilliam, now Lord Matlock these last five years, was present with Arabella and their daughter, also Ashley, the youngest of their children, born the year after the invasion.

The following day, there was to be a cricket match. The tradesmen of the town had approached Darcy and Bingley the day before to inform them that they were fourteen years overdue to meet on the shore for their delayed match. The gentlemen were excessively excited for the game, and the entire village was to turn out for the spectacle.

Suddenly Lady Gordon was at Elizabeth's elbow. "You will never guess who is here," she whispered, motioning for them to follow her.

Elizabeth and Darcy went, along with Mary and William. "*Monsieur le Comte!*" Elizabeth exclaimed as she entered a

small parlour. She searched his face as the others expressed their greetings. "It is just as Lady Catherine said." When the *comte* raised a brow, she continued, "You have not aged a day. You may even look younger."

"This is not impossible," came the familiar reply, accompanied by the same dashing grin. "You as well, *madame*, time has touched you not at all since last we met."

I do not know if I quite believe *that*," Elizabeth laughed as her husband stepped forward and bowed.

"I do, and he is entirely correct. We are delighted to see you, *monsieur*," said Darcy. "How do you come to be in England?"

"I came to congratulate the boy," the *comte* answered. "I met with him a short while ago, to give him a gift. He is growing to be a good man, that one."

"Young Tom has been a good man since he was eleven," said William Bennet, bowing to the *comte*, then making way for his wife. "It is good to see you, *monsieur*."

"I have heard tales of you, *ma petite*, you have been busy," said the *comte* to Mary as she threw her arms around his neck. Mary had spent years honing her skills at the instrument, and then distinguished herself and the Bennet name by composing several concertos that were all the rage across the continent and at home.

"How does Madame du Barry, *monsieur*? Is she still with us?" Elizabeth asked. It had been in the papers when Louis XVII returned to the throne in 1815, and a number of hidden artefacts had been publicly returned to him, along with the Cleopatra Emerald¹.

"Our friend is still with us!" The *comte* smiled at her question. "She has never returned to France, but she is in her eighth decade, and is still served by her loyal friends. She lives quietly, as she did before, when in Eastbourne."

"Please send her our regards, if it is not too much trouble," Elizabeth requested. "Did you repair the flaw in the jewel?"

“Ah, very nearly,” the *comte* sighed ruefully. “We must strive to remember that true perfection in a jewel is found not in its flawlessness, but in the story it carries within. So it is with people – their marks tell the tale of their journey.”

Elizabeth smiled bemusedly and turned to her husband as Mary and William conversed with the *comte* for several more moments.

“Did you ever imagine, when you asked me for a courtship at Oakham Mount, that it would be such an adventure?” Elizabeth asked.

“I do not believe anyone could have expected such events, my dear, but I am very happy that I persuaded you to discover whether we could reach a mutual accord,” Darcy answered.

1 The Cleopatra Emerald is a fictional jewel invented for the purposes of this story, though many of the priceless treasures of the house of Bourbon changed hands repeatedly after the French Revolution.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO:

Elizabeth and Darcy spent most of their time at Pemberley, which had become a house of life and laughter. Lady Darcy was as beloved as Lady Anne was, and their seven children, four daughters and three sons, grew up to be estimable people their parents and families were proud of. Their eldest son Bennet married Matilda Knightley, the daughter of Charlotte and George Knightley. Then Fitzwilliam Alexander Darcy, named for his father, became the Bishop of Derbyshire. George Richard Darcy went into trade, and received a knighthood. Their daughters, Anne, Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Jane, were all popular and well liked young ladies when they entered society, each marrying noblemen or gentlemen of great wealth who lived near Derbyshire, for none of them could bear to be far removed from their family, and dear Pemberley.

Meryton was prodigiously proud of their new baronet when Sir William and Mary Bennet returned to the neighbourhood from St James. They returned with a new crest, for the College of Arms had done their due diligence, and learned that their line of Bennets had a long forgotten coat of arms dating back to the eleventh century. The crest, which featured a bezant between three demi lions, was updated to add a mace, in honour of William's use of the mace in Eastbourne. Mr Bennet and William debated upon a creed, and added the motto *To serve the King with right good will*. The couple did not put on airs, nor was Sir William too above himself to continue as the rector to the Meryton parish. He and Mary were very happy in the parsonage until Mr Bennet died of a trifling cold in the year 1820, when Mrs Bennet retired to Jane and Bingley's

home, and Mary and William moved their brood of three sons and one daughter to Longbourn. With the advice of Darcy and his other friends, William slowly improved the profits of Longbourn to four thousand a year, and accumulated a great deal of money in the bank as a result of his investments with Mr Gardiner. He built a lovely dower house for Mary, and added it to the entail that all future widows and unmarried daughters of Longbourn would be permitted to live there. His sons, Thomas, William, and Henry, all attended university, and were sent out into the world with sums with which to start their fortunes, and they were all successful men. Their sister Mary married a wealthy gentleman with an estate in Cheshire.

Jane and Charles Bingley raised a family of two girls and one son in the Great House at Stoke. Their son returned to trade when he left university, going into business with his cousins, George Darcy and Uncle Gardiner's youngest son Edward. By the age of thirty, all three young men had marvellous fortunes, and had received knighthoods for their services to the country in engineering. Benjamin Bingley's eldest sister Clara married the next Viscount Carlisle, Ashley and Arabella's eldest son Montague Fitzwilliam. Jane's other two daughters, Jane and Louisa, would grow up to marry gentlemen.

The *comte* had liked the young ladies who had been guests of his friend Lady Catherine, and he remembered each of them on their weddings with a delivery of a gift similar the ones sent to the elder Bennet girls a few days before their nuptials, Priscilla receiving a stunning amethyst, Georgiana an incredibly large pearl pendant, and Lydia a delightfully feminine pink topaz. The *comte* was very kind by remembering that the Bennets had another sister that had not been present in Eastbourne, and Kitty was not left out, receiving a magnificent emerald.

Kitty was very happy to introduce Mr Philip Maulver to his tenants when he took up residence at Netherfield after Jane and Bingley vacated the place. Mr Maulver, having been cured entirely of the wildness of his youth, was very keen to learn everything that he must to be a good landowner. His uncle had confessed his neglect of the tenants due to his grief, and the young man was eager to see anything that was still amiss at

Netherfield set right. Kitty and Lydia had taken over visiting the tenants since their sisters married, and Lydia graciously made herself invisible when the young man came, for Kitty was wild about him. Maria Lucas was less gracious, and equally as determined as Kitty to obtain Mr Maulver's good opinion, and for the first time ever, it seemed as if the Bennets and Lucases might fall out. All such worries faded quickly when the handsome colonel of Mr Maulver's previous regiment arrived for a short visit. Another visit was conducted some weeks later, and another, encouraged by Mr Maulver, for he was relieved that anything might end this discord between his sweetheart and her friend. The two couples married in a double wedding on Kitty's nineteenth birthday. Sir Philip succeeded Sir Henry as baronet in the year 1822, and the pair raised a family of two sons, one who followed after his father in running Netherfield, and the other entered the army and rose to the rank of colonel of his regiment.

Lydia married the rector from the parish of Ashwell, Mr Drysdale, whom she met while visiting her cousins, which she did frequently. In their third year of marriage, Cousin Harriet died, and Cousin Mary Frances became frail. The other nuns at the convent would have, of course, looked after her, but Lydia insisted upon bringing her instead to retire at the parsonage, where she was diligently cared for by Lydia and her family. Before she passed four years later, she received a great deal of joy from being included in Lydia's family and knowing her adorable daughters. Lydia's four girls, Harriet, Mary Frances, Catherine, and Daphne married well, the eldest to a local gentleman, the second to a wealthy tradesmen that she met while visiting her Gardiner cousins, the third, to a well distinguished physician, and the youngest, to Charlotte Knightley's son, George.

Charlotte and Mr Knightley lived at Donwell for many years, and had one son and a daughter. Charlotte and Emma Bertram, for once in accord, believed that the neighbourhood around Highbury was lacking, and both encouraged their friends from town who were looking for estates to buy or lease them in Highbury. Three estimable families took up permanent residence on nearby estates, and some new genteel families

moved to the area as well. As a result, more shops opened, a new doctor moved to the village, and very quickly proposed to Miss Bates, who was Charlotte's proudest achievement. Even Lady Emma Bertram envied Charlotte for having made the match.

Lady Emma Bertram did well in her way at Mansfield Park. She ended her husband's wild ways, and curbed the amount of time the Bertrams spent with those '*horrid Crawford siblings*.' She encouraged her new brother to see the regard his cousin bore him, and to her new aunt's horror, happily saw Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram married within two months of her arrival in Northamptonshire. Emma found the elder of her new sisters to be an impulsive, selfish girl, and when the girl attempted to compromise Henry Crawford, who was paying attention to another lady, Emma turned the tables, so Maria Bertram found herself hastily married to a Captain Frederick Tilney, whose father, a General, was outraged, but Sir Thomas had not let any grass grow after the compromise, and had forced the issue long before the man found out about it. Emma Bertram's younger sister-in-law Julia blossomed under the attentions of Mr Rushworth, and their union was a feather in Emma's cap. Sir Thomas Bertram died on a crossing to Antigua in 1814, and his wife died in her sleep perhaps a year later, Emma believed her death was a result of her dependency on laudanum. Emma encouraged her husband to sell his interests in Antigua, and use the funds to improve Mansfield Park. Her old friend Mr Knightley said to his wife that living extravagantly from the sale of slaves was as bad as keeping them, and they did their best to correspond with or socialise with the Bertrams as little as possible.

Georgiana Darcy married an earl, and was widowed young. Jaded by the attempts of the men attempting to gain control of her son's fortune, she retired to Pemberley, where she raised her boy under the protection of her brother, and remained there all of her days.

Lady Catherine married Mr Woodhouse six months after Elizabeth and Darcy's wedding, and moved to Highbury, where for the next thirteen years, she and Mrs Charlotte Knightley enjoyed the company of each other and their friends

and relations who visited often. The day before her wedding, a delivery was made of an expensive polished wood box, and inside was a complete parure of diamonds, with an enormous priceless diamond pendant. Included was a set of impressive diamond cufflinks and a cravat pin. Her groom was at first uncomfortable with the idea of such gifts, but he was reminded by his bride that *he* was the one she was marrying, and the gift was a great compliment to them both. She made an endowment for Tom Tyler's school before construction began, and left the school a legacy in her will. Her tumour never returned, and she found great happiness with her second husband. She left the diamond parure to Georgiana in her will, who gifted it to her son's wife on her wedding day. Anne de Bourgh asked Sir Richard Fitzwilliam and his wife, the second daughter of an earl, to live with her at Rosings Park, and a few years after his wedding, died in her sleep at thirty-one, leaving him her estate and all of her fortune. Richard and Lady Sophie Fitzwilliam had four sons, two of whom continued the glory of the Fitzwilliam name in the army, another of whom became a politician like his grandfather.

Caroline Bingley was a smashing success in London with the support of Lady Matlock, who expanded her circle far wider once she witnessed her reception in town for herself. Once she had the acceptance of Lady Matlock and her friends, Caroline began to receive invitations to the most exclusive entertainments. This was beneficial to the Hursts as well, for while escorting Caroline, Hurst met men with whom he entered several business endeavours, and within a few years, had no further need of his brother in law's hospitality. Caroline admitted to the ladies who were her closest friends that though she had diligently attended her friends and their estate work when she visited their country homes, she never grew to find any enjoyment of it, and she admitted finally that she had no interest in a husband who spent a great deal of time in the country, no matter how grand his home was. In the end, she took Mrs Bennet's advice, and married a politician, an earl, who had a younger brother that lived on and ran his family estate, and who stayed primarily in London, except in the summer, when he followed society and many of the capital's politicians to Brighton. Caroline had two daughters, and never

repined not having an heir to inherit her husband's estate, which passed to the brother who had always lived there with his family. She was left an enormous widow's portion, twice the size of her dowry, and her husband's London home for her lifetime, as well as the cottage in Brighton, which later passed to her daughters, who both married noblemen.

Tom Tyler lived with his mother in the little three bedroom house in Eastbourne until he was seventeen, when he went to university. Most of his siblings were educated in one way or another in the village, either from the vicar, or by apprenticeships. Tom worked hard at home each night teaching his mother and siblings to read as he learned. Mr MacArthur was in charge of dispensing the interest of the reward given the boy by Matlock, and Darcy or Richard checked on him twice a year to ensure all was well. The three hundred pounds a year that they were allotted from his income kept the family in luxuries such as they had never dreamed of, and though they still lived very modestly, they never went hungry, cold, or dirty again. The rest of Tom's income was saved towards the cost of living at university, and for the school he would build. Tom married the daughter of Mr Aldridge, the attorney who employed him, and later inherited his practice. Years later, he succeeded Mr Johnson as mayor. When his last sibling had left home, Tom and his wife Alice invited Bella Tyler to live with them, not to keep house for them, as she thought she might do, but to retire in genteel comfort after all her years of raising Job Tyler's children.

Job Tyler served his years of work in Australia, and upon his release, had no hope of ever affording passage back to England. He found another wife, and got up to his old tricks, but with this new wife he had miscalculated. His bride did not tell him that she had seven brothers until after the wedding, and so whenever he took off, a group of them only hunted him down and brought him back. One night, when he attempted his controlling and abusive ways, his new wife Ava, no stranger to scrapping with her brothers, rendered him unconscious with an iron pan. When he woke, he was beaten soundly by her four youngest brothers, and considered himself lucky that the three elders had left them to it. He never laid a hand on his wife

again, and the three children they had together never learned to fear him under the supervision of their uncles. He was made to work for his brothers-in-law, and his pay was turned over to his wife. He never had funds for the pub, and he never had time for friends who might lead him into trouble. He died in the year 1827, a trained and soft spoken man.

To follow the *Comte St Germain's* path from Eastbourne to the future, Dear Reader... one would need to write a whole new story...

~ *finis* ~

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Cartier is an anglophile in her forties, living out her happily ever after in New England with her very own Darcy. She is mom to an extraordinary young English major, two cats, and a spaniel (co-author) named Belle.

Having cut her teeth on the Tudors and Mary Queen of Scots with the historical fiction of Jean Plaidy and Victoria Holt at sixteen, Caroline read her way through the histories of the Monarchs of England and France, settling into an abiding love for Regency fiction in her twenties.

The first Jane Austen Variation she ever read was *Mr Darcy's Diary* by Amanda Grange. Several years later, a free trial of Kindle Unlimited opened a whole new world of Austenesque fiction. After reading what feels like hundreds of variations, Caroline began her first writing project in 2021, *The Victorian Vagaries, a Victorian Pride and Prejudice Quartet* that was published in 2024.

Having been a gushing member of many fandoms in her time, Caroline takes great enjoyment in historical fiction, fantasy, and YA fiction, and enjoys the works of Rick Riordan, Angie Sage, James Patterson (the Max Ride series), Stephanie Meyers, Suzanne Collins, J K Rowling, L M Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott, C S Lewis, and of course the father of fantasy, J R R Tolkien.

She takes her inspiration for writing from the wonderful authors of Austenesque literature and the romance series of Stephanie Laurens, Julia Quinn, and Lisa Kleypas, in addition to other historical romances and television period dramas.

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**AUSTENESQUE WORKS
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Dare to Refuse Such a Man

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The Recovery of Fitzwilliam Darcy

By Lucy Marin

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