

Chapter 10 ~ Friends and Other Adversaries



Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner each reached for the last piece of toast at exactly the same time.

“You take it Henry, I’ll ring for more.”

“Thank you, Edward. You are a true gentleman--to the needy as well as the greedy.”

Mr. Gardiner laughed while wiping his hands on his napkin. He arose to pull the bell just as Mrs. Gardiner joined them both for breakfast. “Good morning, Henry,” she said as she kissed her husband on the cheek. “Good morning, my dear.”

She went to the sideboard to prepare her plate, selecting sausage and a scone while Mr. Bennet took notice of the one who was conspicuous by her absence.

“I see that my daughter did not come down with you, Maria. Don’t tell me, now that she has made the acquaintance of an Earl’s family, she has taken it into her head to be above her company this morning?”

Mrs. Gardiner turned and laughed, “No, nothing like that at all. Daisy was still in with Jane as I was coming down. I do believe Jane wants to look her best today when she meets with Lady Adele.”

Mr. Bennet nodded and frowned, recalling the brief conversation from the evening before. “I remember all you said about the Earl and Countess and their daughter, but remind me again, who are these sons? Exactly what is it that they do... or *don’t* do, which is the usual state of affairs in such cases.”

“The elder son is Lawrence, the Viscount Whitfield, and,” she paused before saying the rest, “the younger son is named Jonathan Fitzwilliam, who is a colonel in the regulars.”

Henry Bennet mumbled something ungracious and cutting about redcoats before saying, “I know that I should never have reason to find fault with any relation of Darcy’s, but due to our recent...” he coughed, “*unpleasantness*, it has come to my attention that I must now pay more attention to those who associate with my daughters. I trust your judgement, Maria; how did *you* like this Matlocks?”

Maria Gardiner replied earnestly, “They were all very interesting, very friendly people; but you will see so for yourself tonight at the Darcy’s. I believe we have nothing to fear for on Jane’s account. The sons seem like perfect gentlemen. Besides, it would be very unchristian of us to assume that every young man wearing a redcoat is a villain.”

“It is not merely that. Jane is just so trusting of everyone and these Fitzwilliams might get it into their heads one day that my daughter is not worthy of the notice of so wealthy and illustrious a family. I would not have her disappointed.”

Mrs Gardiner reflected and then said, "Many of these great families do have a conceit about them; but I could see none of that. This bodes well for Elizabeth, you know. I will admit that I was a little astonished that they all took to Jane so quickly, but it is a credit to them that they did like her so readily. But then, how could anyone not like our dearest girl; she has the sweetest and kindest disposition."

"Yes, yes," replied Henry, "everyone likes Jane; she is the epitome of kindness and amiability; but tell me this, how does she *seem* to you both?"

"What do you mean, brother," asked Mr. Gardiner, who shared a brief look of significance with his wife. "Jane is a fine, healthy girl; she appears perfectly well to me."

"Come now Edward, don't pretend to be ignorant of the situation. I know my wife has written to you both. You both know perfectly well that Jane has refused this Charles Bingley fellow."

"Well," said Mrs Gardiner coming straight to the point, "I will not sit here and pretend not to know of what you speak. As it happens, my dear sister-in-law did mention it in her last letter."

"And your opinion on the matter is--?"

"I believe my husband and I are of the same mind when I say that we have chosen not to have an opinion."

"And," added Mr. Gardiner, "as we know none of the particulars of Jane's refusal, we can only assume she had a good reason." A maid stepped in. "Toast," whispered Mr. Gardiner and the girl bobbed a curtsy and went away.

"That is why I wrote and so suddenly turned up at your door. Lizzy felt that Jane needed a few days away from that gentleman. Mr. Bingley, I'm afraid, has not quite given up the ship, so to speak."

"I can't help but say how much I like him. When we met Mr. Bingley during the summer, we found him to be a most agreeable young man. It goes without saying that Jane has all of my loyalty, but I can't help it, I feel so very sorry for him." Mrs Gardiner began worrying the handle of her teacup, thinking of all Jane had to endure this last year.

"That sounds very much like an opinion, sister."

"Yes, I'm afraid it does," laughed Mrs Gardiner as she realized that perhaps, as Mr. Darcy's particular friend, she had a little loyalty reserved for Bingley as well. "Yet," she continued, "I have always observed that young people do seem to figure these things out for themselves. Look at Lizzy and Mr. Darcy. If Lizzy can go from disliking a man so violently to loving him so completely, I am certain things will soon fall into place for Jane as well."

"Yes, let us hope it does."

Seeing her brother-in-law and husband nod in agreement, she sighed and changed the subject. "My, what a busy day we all have. Henry, you are for the booksellers, I understand, my husband must get to the warehouse, and I have a thousand little matters to attend to before tonight. I must

say that I am looking forward to Miss Darcy's dinner party this evening. I hope you both are as—" but Mrs Gardiner was cut off by the housekeeper's sudden appearance, trying to get her notice. "Yes, what is it, Smith?"

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but you are needed at the door, this minute!"



Daisy was just finishing up Jane's hair when Mrs. Gardiner knocked at her door to beg admittance. "Good morning, Aunt. I know I'm late for breakfast; I am sorry, I shan't be long." She dismissed the maid. "Thank you, Daisy; it looks lovely."

Mrs Gardiner waited until the door was closed before she spoke. "Jane, dear, I have something of great import to tell you. A note has just arrived from Lady Matlock concerning your plans to meet with Lady Adele today in the park."

Jane was instantly alarmed. "She is well, is she not? I do hope she is still able to go. The children will be so disappointed if something has happened to put off our outing."

"No, my dear, it is nothing like that; it's just..." Mrs Gardiner looked down at the crisp piece of paper in her hand and handed the note to Jane. It merely read:

At your disposal, with the understanding that we would be delighted to have you and the children join us for tea this afternoon.

Jane seemed puzzled by the cryptic message, so her aunt walked towards the window and held back the drapes. Curious, she arose and peered out. Down in front of the Gardiner's house was an enormous, gleaming black Barouche. It was complete with four perfectly matched grey horses, four liveried servants and the door emblazoned with, she assumed, the Matlock family coat-of-Arms.

Jane gasped at such a splendid sight. "Surely there is some mistake, Aunt. Yesterday, as we were leaving the Darcy's, Lady Matlock made no mention of offering her carriage to me this morning. I told her that the children and I would walk to the park." She contemplated for a moment. "Perhaps the carriage just waits to take a message back."

"No, my dear, I thought of that," replied Mrs Gardiner, "I sent the boy out to ask and he was told by that coachman there that he was to deliver you and the children to the park and anywhere else you chose to go, then on to the Matlock House for tea afterwards and then finally to bring you all home again."

"How kind of her ladyship, but surely--surely I can not keep her carriage the whole of the morning; we must make haste and hurry the children along so as not to indispose the countess."

Mrs Gardiner, seeing the anxiety on Jane's face, and the frantic way she went about collecting her things, touched her nieces arm to stop her. "No dear, I am sure her ladyship would not send her only carriage; the Earl of Matlock must have more than one carriage at his disposal."

Jane nodded to the sensibility of her aunt's words. "Oh yes, I had not thought of that; I am sure you are right. How very kind of her to think of us. But Aunt, what have I done to garner such courteous attention?"

Mrs Gardiner pulled Jane down into the window seat and took her hand. "My dear, did you not notice that the Matlock's, all of them, seemed quite taken with you yesterday?"

"They are such a pleasant family, but I can be of no real interest to them. I am sure the countess wishes only to show me the courtesy as Elizabeth's sister."

"Yes, that does seem most likely," replied Mrs Gardiner, who had other suspicions, but thought it best to keep them to herself.



Jane had now been in town for three days and Elizabeth was all eagerness to receive a letter. *Had she seen Mr. Darcy? Did he seem in health? Did she have an opportunity to pass on her letter on to him? Were her aunt and uncle well?* These were the questions she looked forward to Jane answering with great interest. So, when the butler placed the anticipated missive in her hands during breakfast, she dispensed with her usual custom of setting off for the privacy of the gardens and broke the seal then and there to read it immediately. All eyes turned towards her.

"What does Jane have to say of the latest fashions, Lizzy?" called out Mrs Bennet, keen to hear the news from town. "I am quite distressed about the length of my sleeves for the coming year."

Elizabeth, knowing she would get no peace if she did not oblige her mother or sisters, chose to read out several short and rather unremarkable passages to satiate their curiosity.

"Jane does not mention the fashions, Mamma, but it would appear that Mr. and Miss Darcy have both called in at the Gardiners."

"And well they should! What does he have to do in London anyway? Business, I suppose, but even that should not keep him from doing his duty to his new family."

Elizabeth was barely listening and smiled to herself as she read the next lines.

I would on no account trifle with a dear sister's affections by not relaying information as to the health of her intended. He seems very well, though naturally disappointed that I was not you, no matter how much he tried to hide it. But his spirits did increase after I slipped him your letter. Oh, dearest Lizzy, here is yet another reason why you should have come in my stead.

"I do hope he did not catch a chill on the road," complained Mrs Bennet to no one in particular. "Travelling at this time of year in all this wet weather—I would not be surprised if he had taken cold and died right there on the road--and then where would we all be--starving in the hedgerows, I'll wager."

“Mamma,” said Kitty looking up from her porridge, “I thought you always said that people don’t die from little, trifling colds.”

“Oh, shut up, Kitty,” said Mrs Bennet irritably, angry at having her own words thrown back in her face. “No one wants to hear anything you have to say!”

“I have always observed,” added Mary, ignoring Kitty’s sulky expression, “that active, useful sort of people like Mr. Darcy hardly ever take ill. It is always the idle and useless among us.”

“Oh, that reminds me, girls,” said Mrs Bennet, “Your Aunt Philips has a cold and I have had cook prepare some of her chicken soup. One of you will have to walk into Meryton directly after breakfast.”

While her sister’s argued over which one would have the “honour” of visiting their aunt, Elizabeth kept reading.

Mr. Darcy smiled a great deal whenever your name was mentioned. Uncle Gardiner must have said your name ten times throughout the visit, just to see his reaction. I must say that he becomes remarkably handsome when he smiles, not to say that he was unhandsome before, but his face shines with delight at the mere mention of you.

“Jane says that Mr. Darcy is well and is in his best looks,” said Elizabeth, smiling at the tacit compliment Jane had just given her.

“Ah ha! In his *best* looks, is he? And all while he is away from his fiancé! That does not seem very complimentary to me! If I were you, Miss Lizzy, I would have gone to London myself no matter what my father said. It will be all your father’s fault when Mr. Darcy falls in love with some heiress in town and loses all interest in you. His best looks, indeed!”

Elizabeth looked heavenward, sighed, and then read on.

Miss Darcy is a very pretty young woman, a little shy and if I may confess, seems very shy of me in particular. I tried to draw her into conversation several times, but she seemed loath to answer. I can not help but feel she dislikes me for some reason. I am not saying she was rude or ill-mannered towards me, but she seemed distant and somewhat ill at ease in my company. I can only attribute it to her disappointment that I was not you.

Elizabeth puzzled over that for a while. Everyone liked Jane and she could not believe Miss Darcy capable of taking a set against anyone. This would require further thought, but at present she was not at liberty to think the matter over for her mother kept accosting her for more details.

“What more does dear Jane have to say? Have they seen any new plays? Have they even been to the theatre?”

My aunt says we will call upon Miss Darcy tomorrow to return her visit. Oh, I nearly forgot to mention, we have all been invited to dine with them the day after.

“They have all been invited to dine at Mr. Darcy’s house tonight.”

“OoooOoo! How well that sounds! I hope that there will be plenty of people there for them to meet! I am certain that my future son-in-law keeps an uncommon fine table and why should he not; two or three French cooks, at least and ten-thousand a year!”

Elizabeth huffed as her impatience with her mother grew. She wished she had not shown her eagerness and instead had left the room with her letter. She turned the page over.

Mr. Darcy says that there will be some cousins in town for us to meet. He made mention of Colonel Fitzwilliam being there along with his brother and sister. I remember your saying before how agreeable you found that gentleman in Kent, so perhaps I will have someone to converse with on the subject of books and music.

“They are to meet Mr. Darcy’s cousins, the children of his uncle, the Earl.”

“Oooo! Now do you see how it is, Lizzy? It is all exactly as I have planned. Your connection to Mr. Darcy has already brought your sister to the notice of an Earl’s family. Are there any male cousins in this family for Jane to meet—*eligible* male cousins? And, you know, if Jane likes one of these cousins of Mr. Darcy’s and falls in love with one of them, then Mary can marry Mr. Bingley and Kitty will marry Mr. Goulding...”

“It is so unfair! Why do I always have to have Mr. Goulding? Why can’t I have Mr. Bingley?”

“Oh, hold your tongue, girl! My nerves, my nerves...”

The ensuing argument that rose up from her mother and Kitty caused Elizabeth to excuse herself due to a sudden headache; she just could not take such tediousness another minute.*



Colonel Fitzwilliam knew he had to find some excuse for Darcy and Georgiana for missing luncheon that afternoon. Something along the lines of his need to look in at headquarters, make inquiries, that sort of thing. His headquarters proximity to St. James Park was just an added benefit.

He checked his watch and then glared down critically at his batman’s work as he put the final polish to his black leather boots.

“There now, sir; shiny enough to see your reflection, I dare say.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam studied himself in the long looking glass, buttoning his white waistcoat, and turning his heels too and fro to inspect his batman’s handiwork.

“The boots are very good, but this neck cloth... it still isn’t right.”

Preston stood back and eyed the black material encircling Colonel Fitzwilliam's neck. It was perfect, just as it had always been, but he made a show of touching it nonetheless just to keep the peace.

"There now, I believe that's better."

"It doesn't feel tight enough," responded the Colonel irritably as his own fingers worked at the article.

"Sir, if I tighten it anymore I'll cut off your breathing."

Jonathan dropped his hands with a ragged sigh; nothing about his appearance seemed right that morning.

"What about this shirt? I don't think I like this shirt."

"You look remarkably fine this morning, sir. Any young lady that you happen to meet today will find no fault with you, if I have anything to say about it."

Colonel Fitzwilliam started; Preston's keen sense of perception unnerved him, but he stood tall and cleared his throat. "What are you talking about, man? There is no young lady! Pray, who is this young lady?"

Preston was no fool. Mr. Darcy's servants below stairs were full of talk of the master's lovely future sister-in-law who had visited the afternoon before. The footmen and maids, who had been lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the young woman, and anticipating the beauty of their new mistress, were describing her features glowingly to the enthusiastic titterings of the kitchen staff just as Preston had happened by.

Preston knew something had changed in the Colonel from the moment he stepped into the dressing room that morning. He found that his master had arisen quite early, had shaved himself, and was standing closely to the mirror, desperately trying to get his hair to lie down.

And then there was the matter of his clothes, every pair of breeches he presented that morning was summarily rejected as either too ugly, too much out of fashion, or the wrong colour. This led to his dissatisfaction with his shirts; either too white or not white enough. The waistcoat selection had been a nightmare; they had gone through every one in the Colonel's possession, several times. And this ended up being all for naught as the Colonel decided that the only thing he could wear that day was his uniform.

Preston rolled his eyes but played along. "Begging the Colonel's pardon; my mistake; I had no idea of any particular lady; was only speaking in general terms, so to speak."

"Yes, a mistake! You are very much mistaken!" The Colonel took a deep, cleansing breath and cleared his throat again. "I go to visit General Blakeney this morning and I must look my best."

"Naturally, sir."

"No one likes to see a shabby soldier."

“I could not agree more, sir.”

Avoiding Preston’s eye, he said, “And afterwards, I might pop round to the park--it’s just across the road. My sister will be there today with the children—and her new friend—who,” he added as quickly as possible, lest Preston got some notion into his head, “is not the young lady in question, if there was any young lady.”

Preston nodded and stepped over to the wardrobe and removed two red coats. The one he held in his right hand was an extremely smart-looking scarlet affair, with a fair amount of impressive gold braiding scrolling up the sleeves and down the front. The other coat, which Preston held in his left hand, was comparatively plainer; it’s only decoration was a double row of brass buttons down the breast which the colonel usually wore for more common occasions.

“And which will it be today, sir,” asked Preston, raising one eyebrow haughty.

The Colonel huffed, annoyed at the smug expression written all over Preston’s face. “Oh, give it here, man, and be quick about it before you find yourself in the stocks!”

Preston held out his right hand, making no effort to hide his self-satisfied smirk.



Adele held back the shade slightly while looking out of the window of her carriage for signs of the Barouche. She knew she was early and did not want to take the chance of leaving her new acquaintance waiting for her.

Delphie was no less curious. Where her aunt had only opened the shade partially to afford a view of the carriage path, Delphie had thrown the shades wide open on her side of the carriage. She had never before seen so many other children together and she could not contain her excitement. She rather enjoyed stepping on her brother and knocking off his cap as she pushed past him to see all the people in the park.

Edward, who was sitting quite still, had brought along his book to read. He had several more pages to read as his father had mentioned something about quizzing him upon his return. His little sister annoyed him greatly with her fidgeting and gasps of “look, look” every time someone who caught her fancy walked by.

The children’s nursery maid looked down her nose at the goings on outside the carriage. So many noisy people, so many noisy children; she wanted nothing more than to be back at the Matlock’s townhouse, sewing or gossiping.

On the opposite side of the park, Caroline Bingley and her sister Louisa Hurst were just making their entrance. Caroline had been in a foul mood for the last several days since receiving her brother’s mean-spirited letter informing her of his displeasure with her and Louisa, and of the cessation of his friendship with Mr. Darcy. She threw a nasty look in the direction of her sister; a look full of blame for making her leave the comforts of the house.

Louisa Hurst could not have taken another day cooped up inside with such an irritable, ill-tempered person. She practically had to drag Caroline along on a walk through the park. Fresh air and exercise was just the type of thing her sister needed to sooth her disconcerted feelings.

Caroline assessed the crowd. “You never said there would be so many children here today,” complained Caroline, holding her parasol closely to her person while trying to avoid actually coming into contact with a child.

“Well, I did not know that, now did I?”

“I’m going home!”

Caroline turned to go, but the sight of the coat-of-arms of the Earl of Matlock instantly drew Louisa’s interested notice. Grabbing her sister’s arm, she pulled her back and exclaimed, “Look, Caroline, that is an interesting sight, is it not?” She pointed to a handsome blue Brougham parked several yards away on the path.

“It is a carriage, Louisa,” said Caroline crossly as she stepped away from another child who seemed as though he was about to brush up against her. “Surely you have seen a carriage before!”

“Don’t be such a ninny, Caroline; you must know that it can only mean that a member of the Fitzwilliam family is here today. That must be of some interest to you.”

“Why should it interest me? The Fitzwilliam’s aren’t anything to me—anymore.” A black look overtook Miss Bingley’s face as she struggled with a ghastly thought. “Eliza Bennet, Louisa! How could he choose Eliza Bennet—over me?” She reached into her reticule for a handkerchief.”

Louisa looked around nervously, hoping that no one noticed her sister’s slight breakdown.

“And what, may I ask, does she have that I don’t have? With her blowsy hair and brown complexion and muddy petticoats! And now with Charles’ behaviour towards Mr. Darcy, we will never be able to call. I’ll never forgive Charles; never!”

“Calm yourself, sister, calm yourself; you are making a scene.”

Caroline began whimpering in a strangulated sort of way. “You’d make a scene too if Charles had gone and abandoned you to the streets of London amongst urchins and beggary. And why may I ask? I just know this has something to do with Jane Bennet. He’s probably gone and done something foolish like asking for her hand and she must have refused him; that can be the only possible explanation for his turning on all of us!”

Louisa had read Charles’ letter for herself and although her brother never quite came out to say that Jane Bennet had refused any suit of his, she figured that something of that kind must have happened. Why else would he go crawling back to Hertfordshire in the first place? Anyone with half a brain knew why. And due to the lack of a letter asking for their congratulations, he had sent nothing but a letter full of threats and resentment.

However, she chose to view the separation from her brother in more practical terms. She knew that Charles had never been able to go for more than a week in anger with anyone or without someone's advice on something or another. She was satisfied within herself that she would be seeing her penitent brother in London before the week was out, begging for their forgiveness.

"I thought the Countess of Matlock had raven hair," asked Louisa, ignoring her sister's loud sniffing and seeing a young lady with red hair holding back a curtain.

"Yes," said Caroline, wiping her swollen red nose and returning her handkerchief to her bag, "That must be the daughter; the severe one who never opens her mouth and looks so disapproving of everyone that she meets."

"Well, she is the daughter of the Earl of Matlock, after all, hardly surprising behaviour; every woman in that family thinks themselves so above their company. But not dearest Georgiana," Louisa rushed to add.

"Oh no, never dear Georgiana, who, we must say is actually a Darcy. Oh Louisa," said Caroline suddenly going very pale by the mere mention of the name Darcy. This immediately led her into another fit of whimpering. "Eliza Bennet, Louisa! How could he choose Eliza Bennet?"

Louisa directed her agitated sister over to a bench, away from the crowds and away from the embarrassing possibility of meeting Mr. Darcy's relations while her sister was so afflicted. However, Caroline Bingley's distress received absolutely no notice whatsoever for many of the crowd had also taken an interest in the fine carriage, as well. The illustrious Fitzwilliam family were not known to take an interest in the more common pursuits of London, so to them, this was an extraordinary site indeed.

Caroline turned away to fret over her unfortunate situation and to feel sorry for herself, while Louisa kept her eyes fixed on the scene, especially now since the stately barouche of the Earl of Matlock had just then come thundering importantly up the lane. Every curious eye in the crowd was drawn by the fineness of that carriage and the flash of the royal blue livery of the servants; everything about it spoke of riches and importance.

The driver of the barouche pulled its massive frame over to the side of the path, and in keeping with the strict precedence the Earl required in all things, directly in front of the brougham there. Louisa's and many other necks in the park that day were craned in order to have a better view, eagerly wanting to know who else of the distinguished Fitzwilliam family would grace the assembled masses there with their presence.

Lady Adele was the first to alight from her own carriage, drawing whispers from the onlookers. Comments such as *the only daughter*, and *fifty-thousand pounds* made their way through the crowd of those who were busy trying to seem as uninterested as possible. Edward and Delphie followed next and the whispers in the crowd turned towards the handsomeness of young Lord Fitzwilliam and little Lady Philadelphia.

Seeing a servant now stepping out of the brougham, all eyes naturally went to the next carriage. One tall and imposing footman let down the steps while another handed out a young woman followed by four children of various ages. Whispers flew through the crowd as to who she could be, but it was generally agreed upon within minutes that she was a most comely and attractive

young lady many had ever seen. It was also quite obvious to everyone that there was no possibility that so young a person could be mother to all the children assembled.

Lady Adele stepped forward to greet her new friend with a curtsy and a tentative shake of the hand. The children were introduced and Edward, at first only seeing the two Gardiner girls almost made a run for it. However, when Thomas and Philip Gardiner, two boys of ten and seven were brought forward, Edward was well pleased with his circumstances.

Delphie was in raptures to meet five year old Henrietta and thirteen year old Maria Gardiner, especially when they placed her in between them both and each took one of her hands, instinctively knowing that it would be their job to look after her.

Jane and the children were attended to by Daisy, the Gardiner's pretty upper-maid, who seemed anxious after having ridden in an Earl's carriage and now more so when she saw that she was in the company of several very tall, handsome, and smartly dressed footmen.

Louisa grasped her sister's hand and whispered, "Caroline, look, look; do you see who I see?" Caroline was not paying very much attention for she was far too busy scowling in the opposite direction. Louisa had to nudge her to look up. Caroline turned and stared in shock, watching the sight of her *most intimate friend*, Jane Bennet, walking away from the carriages arm-in-arm with Lady Adele Fitzwilliam.



Jane and Lady Adele walked through the park in companionable silence, letting the children more or less lead the way and stop wherever they chose. Their first stop was a sort of half tent and children were all amazed at the acrobats assembled within. Delphie just stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed as a man wrapped his legs around his neck; Maria and Henrietta only giggled. And it was all Jane and Lady Adele could do to keep the three rambunctious boys from following the tumbler's lead by imitating the flips and jumps of the troupe inside.

No sooner was that show was over, when children began to call out for sweets from a passing cart. The Gardiner children each eagerly pulled out their own pocket money while Edward and Delphie looked to their aunt questionably, as if to ask: aren't we supposed to have our own pocket money, too? They had never carried money in their lives as someone was always about to handle such things for them. Lady Adele gave Jane an embarrassed sort of half smile as she reached into her purse and produced two half crowns, handing them to her niece and nephew.

While the other children made their purchases (with Delphie asking the man, "What's that? What's that? to each and every item she saw) Edward struck up a conversation with Jane.

"Are you to be my aunt now?"

Jane, who had been supervising the candy selection turned and smiled causing Edward to blush. "What did you say, dear?"

"Well, my father says that your sister is to marry my uncle, but I don't think that can be right, for my uncle is actually my cousin, is he not?"

“You are a very smart young man, Edward, you are correct. So, I guess in a way, I am to be a sort of distant cousin; not an aunt.”

“Then what do I call you if we are to be cousins? Georgiana lets me call her Georgiana and she is my cousin, too. I can’t very well call you Miss Bennet, now can I?”

Jane had to laugh at the charming look on his face: one of perfect confidence coexisting with a nose covered in boyish freckles. “Well, do you have an idea of what you would like to call me?”

“Might I call you Jane, like Tom and Phil do?”

Jane marvelled at how quickly Thomas and Philip Gardiner had become *Tom* and *Phil*.

“Teddy, quick, come here and take a look at this one,” called Philip Gardiner, excitedly.

Jane nearly laughed, saying, “Yes, *Teddy*, you may call me Jane, if you like.” She reached out and smoothed down his hair and Edward returned to his two mates.

The observant Delphie, after hearing some of her brother’s conversation, ran up to show-off her selection. “Look, Jane, look, look!” It was a large, bright red lollipop.

With the confection of their choice in their sticky hands, they all stopped to take in the puppet show. Lady Adele ushered the three younger children down in front while Jane found seats for the three older on a bench off to the side. All of the adults kept to the rear with the two servants keeping a sharp eye on their respective charges.

Edward’s loud laughter could be heard over all of the other children as one of the puppets struck another with a club. He turned to see how Jane liked it and Jane, catching his eye, couldn’t help herself and she laughed as well. However, unbeknownst to Jane she was being observed from two different quarters.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had now joined those assembled and he stood off to the side. And being a good head taller than the group of mothers to whom he stood behind, he could easily see Jane Bennet’s laughing countenance. He marvelled at her ease and ability to have a good time and his heart was drawn to her that much more.

She suddenly looked in his general direction, almost as if she could sense someone’s eyes upon her and the Colonel self-consciously bowed his head, hoping she would not catch him staring.

Jane began to look around at all the other laughing people surrounding her and that is when she saw them. Standing on the far side of the crowd as if trying to get her attention were Mr. Bingley’s sisters.

The ladies both nodded leaving Jane conflicted as to whether or not she should acknowledge them. Even though they had made it perfectly plain how they felt about her, Jane debated within herself whether it would be prudent to re-establish any sort of acquaintance. The only curious thing was why they seemed to want her attentions now? She stared ahead blankly, determined not to look their way again.

Adele noticed her new friend's sudden quietness and distressed look. However, upon observing the two Bingley sisters for herself and seeing that they were trying to get their attention, she asked, "Is not that Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley?"

Jane looked again very briefly. "Y-Yes," she stammered, "I-I believe it is." She lowered her head and fiddled with the strings of her reticule.

"I understand that you do know them," asked Adele with a little trepidation of her own.

"I do, a little," replied Jane.

Adele hardly knew the sisters, never associated with them, and did not care much to be in their company; but their brother was another matter.

She had liked Mr. Bingley very much since she first met him at a ball the previous season. He had paid her particular attention at that gathering. He danced with her several times, talked with spirit on any subject that flew into his head, and liked everyone that he met. It warmed Adele's heart just to think of him.

"I have met that family once before; at a ball, just before they all went away to Hertfordshire, I believe. Mr. Bingley is a charming young man, is he not? But I hardly need tell you that for your family lives quite close to Mr. Bingley in the country."

"Yes, we do."

"And are you much acquainted with Mr. Bingley?"

"I... um, yes, I know him... a little. I have not seen very much of him; he has only just recently returned to the country after having been gone a year."

Adele had long wondered if Mr Bingley was admired by any of the Bennet sisters. Now here it was, as Jane had just stated: he had not seen very much of any of them lately. Surely if he admired one of them, he would not have stayed away so long. Adele let out a breath she had not even realized she had been holding.

Jane hardly knew what to do and looked around wildly as if trying to find some way to get away. Her pale looks raised an alarm in her companion and in the Colonel as well, who had just began to push his way through the crowd.

"Oh, Miss Bennet," said Lady Adele, "you do look unwell; perhaps we ought to go."

Hearing that, Daisy, who was standing a few feet behind Jane, was quickly at her side, her concern for Miss Bennet evident.

"Oh no," replied Jane, "The children, they are having so much—" she stopped when she realized she was receiving several curious glances from onlookers. She did not want to make such a fuss and stepped several feet away to distance herself somewhat from the crowd. "If I can be allowed to sit for a moment only—I--"

As if like magic, Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared before her. He stopped suddenly at his sister's penetrating look.

“Brother, what do you do here?” exclaimed Adele at his unexpected and somewhat unwelcome appearance. “I don't remember anyone inviting you. Oh, never mind that, Miss Bennet feels rather unwell. Be useful and take her back to the carriage while I gather up the children.”

Jane protested, “Oh no, please, let them finish enjoying the puppets. I am perfectly well, I assure you. It is only the crowd... so many people...”

Adele nodded reluctantly, but agreed to remain with the children as Daisy and the Colonel led Jane away. “Take her to my carriage, brother,” Adele called after them and the Colonel turned and nodded.

Making their way back to the carriage, the Colonel went on ahead and instructed a footman to let down the steps. Miss Bennet and the maid stepped inside and sat. Daisy began to fan Jane with a book that had been left on the seat as Jane searched her bag.

“Oh dear; how very silly of me!”

The Colonel, hearing her, looked in.

Seeing his questioning and concerned look, Jane said, “Oh, it is nothing, sir—I don't know where my head is at today—I forgot to bring a handkerchief with me today.”

The Colonel said nothing and reached into his pocket and produced one of his own.

“You are very kind, sir.”

When she reached for it, the Colonel saw Jane's trembling hands. He looked up and his heart was instantly in his throat. He noticed tears in Jane's eyes that were threatening to fall. Gripping his sword out of instinct, he looked all around as if to discover the means of her distress, for whatever had caused her pain would not be long for that world.

Adele followed soon after with all the children who did not seem to notice that Jane was no longer with them as each were talking excitedly over the other, exclaiming their satisfaction with the puppets, and laughing at the all they had seen and did. She bid the nursery maid to put them all into the barouche and then went to her own carriage.

Adele, pushing the Colonel aside said, “Brother, you go ride in the barouche with the children.” She did not think Miss Bennet need be exposed to his unabashed stares.

“Oh dear, I am becoming such a nuisance,” said Jane, mortified.

“Miss Bennet, you are being no such thing,” replied Adele. “We will go back to my father's house and once mother gets some tea in you, I am sure you will feel so much better.”



Louisa Hurst looked all around. She had seen Jane Bennet not ten feet away only moments ago and then, as if like magic, she had disappeared. “Oh honestly,” she exclaimed, “Where could she have gotten to? We will never find her again in this crush of people.”

But Caroline knew instinctively that looking for Jane ought not to be attempted. She reached out her hand to stop her sister from taking another step. Lady Adele Fitzwilliam and Jane Bennet had surely seen them both and their vanishing into the crowd soon after could only have one meaning and it was too horrible to imagine. She and Louisa had just received the dreaded cut direct.