

## Chapter 15 ~ As Families Often Do



During dinner that evening, the Fitzwilliam ladies and the Fitzwilliam men were in two distinctly different camps. Where the two ladies talked with much enthusiasm, the two gentlemen hardly said anything at all.

Lady Adele wondered several times what delights she and her cousin, Georgiana, would discover in Hertfordshire. Lady Matlock's only concern was what the fashion for ladies were in that particular county; asking her daughter what she would take along and whether she thought this or that as too much out of style.

Lord Matlock said almost nothing. He divided his time between nodding at things his wife said (which he had not heard) and glaring at his son.

After their pudding had been eaten, Lord Matlock stood abruptly and nodded in the direction of the library. Colonel Fitzwilliam understood him perfectly and could do nothing but obey.

Once in the room, his Lordship produced his pocket watch and seemed to be calculating just how much time he needed to perform his task. The Earl next walked to the liquor cabinet, reached for the port, paused, raised a bushy eyebrow and decided upon the crystal decanter. It contained his very best brandy which he generously poured for them both.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was astonished. His father almost never shared his best brandy with guests and, in fact, had never shared it with either of his sons. He handed his son a glass and just as John put it to his mouth anticipating its smoothness, his lordship exclaimed boisterously, "High time you were married, don't you think?"



"And did you meet any eligible young men while in London, Jane? But, of course you did! I am sure Mr. Darcy introduced you to any number of young gentlemen of his acquaintance. I am certain that he has *many* friends in town at this time of year?"

Mr. Bennet, who had brought a newspaper to the dinner table to distract himself from the nonsensical talk of his wife and daughters, lowered one corner of it and waited for Jane's reply to his wife's question.

"No, I did not meet any of Mr. Darcy's friends," said Jane softly.

“But surely, Jane, Mr. Darcy would not be so neglectful as to not invite several gentlemen to dine at his home on the same night you had dinner there.”

“No, indeed, Mamma, for it was nothing more than a small *family* dinner; Miss Darcy did an excellent job managing it, for as you know, she is only sixteen.”

Mr. Bennet winked at his eldest daughter and returned to his reading.

“But, why did he not—?” Mrs. Bennet was interrupted by Elizabeth coming to her sister’s rescue.

“And Miss Darcy, did she play for you all that evening? She is a very accomplished musician.”

“Oh yes,” said Jane enthusiastically, “very accomplished; her talent far exceeds anything that I have ever had the pleasure of hearing before.”

Mary looked up from her soup, highly mortified.

“What I meant to say,” Jane rushed to add after a quick glance at her sister’s stricken face, “is that for so young a person... not yet out in society... and used to performing before others. She is very shy and had to be encouraged by Mr. Darcy to play for everyone.”

Satisfied that Jane would never tell a falsehood, Mary returned to her meal thinking well of herself since no one had to encourage her to display her talents.

Kitty, curious to know more of Georgiana Darcy asked, “What sort of gown did she wear at dinner? I’m sure she wears nothing that is not the height of fashion.”

“Oh no, Kitty, Miss Darcy dresses rather simply.” Jane then added, “The gown she wore at dinner reminded me very much of your new white muslin. It had similar sort of lace trimmings.”

“No lace, Jane, please, no lace,” mumbled Mr. Bennet from behind his paper.

Of course, when talking of finery, Mrs. Bennet must have her opinion known. “I am sure Mr. Darcy only permits his sister to step into the most exclusive shops in the very best parts of London. No Cheapside warehouses for her, I’ll wager. Now there’s a girl who will never have to worry for having a lack of suitors. My sister Philips mentioned just the other day that she had heard from a friend of a friend... of a friend that Miss Darcy comes with twenty thousand pounds at least--and very likely more! How very, very fortunate for you, dearest, dearest, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth looked to Jane, communicating in one glance how very tired she was hearing of her good fortune.

Mrs Bennet continued, oblivious to the fact that her family had grown exceedingly fatigued with this same old story.

“And I tell everyone I know that my Lizzy is very lucky and has done a very clever thing by capturing Mr. Darcy’s eye. Oh Lizzy, what pin money you will have, what jewels! If it were to have happened to me, I would be forever overcome with such tremblings and flutterings that I dare say I would never be able to stand.”

“Then it is rather fortunate then that it falls to our Lizzy to find herself so rich,” remarked Mr. Bennet standing, tucking his newspaper under one arm and heading for the door. “It would never do to see you always prostrate upon the floor; it would give such an odd appearance to all of our neighbours.”



“But the strangest thing of all is how could your cousin Darcy, who by all accounts considers himself a connoisseur of beauty, pass up such a jewel? This Miss Elizabeth Bennet must be five times lovelier than Miss Jane. Is she? You have seen them both.” Lord Matlock did not pause for an answer, for he had come up with one of his own. “No! Impossible! Miss Jane is such a treasure. How very lucky this is for us!”

“Yes, father, how very lucky for *us*,” replied the Colonel dryly, resting his aching forehead in his hands. His father had been speaking non-stop for the last half hour.

“Your mother seems quite taken with her already and as you know, one word from me will have your mother singing *your* praises to the sky.”

Jonathan peered between his fingers at the preposterous notion of his mother courting Miss Bennet’s favour on his behalf.

“Father, I don’t think--.”

Not attending to anything his son had to say, he went on. “I still say that we must have her come to us at Matlock. An invitation should be extended to her immediately for next month—no, no, this month if we can manage it. I can’t wait to take her riding in the park.”

“I think you count your cart before your horse, Father. Should you not wait to see if she is disposed to think favourably upon *us* first? She may not wish to come to Matlock in the dead of winter just to ride in our frigid park.”

Lord Matlock, still not hearing anything but his own voice, suddenly smiled broadly. “I saw the way you were looking at her.”

Slightly panicked at the idea of being so easily seen through and thinking that if his father noticed his admiration of the lady in question, he began to wonder who else might have noticed.

“I have no idea what you can possibly mean. What way was I *looking* at her?”

“I hate it when you choose to be obtuse. At dinner the other night! You did not take your eyes off her! That means that you must like her very much.”

“Yes, Father, yes, yes, I *like* her,” he said noncommittally, “Just like I like my horse and my favourite pair of boots.” It was of lie, of course, he knew perfectly well that he’d about reached the point where he was nearly insane with love for her. John got up to pour another brandy.

“Stop talking nonsense, John, and tell me how you really feel.” The Earl waggled his eyebrows.

Not taking the bait, the Colonel simply sighed and said, “I find her perfectly sweet and charming; I think she would make an excellent friend to my sister.”



“And speaking of my sister,” said Mrs Bennet as they were moving from the dining parlour into the drawing room after dinner, “one of you girls must go to her in the morning for she has a terrible cold. You shouldn’t be gone more than a few days, Kitty.”

With no Lydia and with the Philips’s sudden and fervent dislike of the militia, the idea of spending several days in her aunt and uncle’s home was now an evil. In the absence of all her aunt’s previous amusements, Mrs Philips had recently acquired two new additions to her household who had taken a special dislike to Kitty. She immediately protested.

“Me? But why do I have to go? It is so unfair! You know I don’t like my aunt’s new pugs. I am sure one of them tried to bite me the other day!”

Elizabeth answered Jane’s sudden questioning look with a whisper. “Aunt Philips has acquired a new hobby.”

“Oh, for heavens sake, Kitty, what a fuss you make! You’ll tear my nerves into shreds! If you find it so *disagreeable* then Mary may go in your stead.”

Mary eyes flew up from her book. “But mamma, you know I go to visit poor Mrs. Jones in the morning! You know I read to her from the newspapers and help her with her letters once a week.”

“Yes, yes, the poor sickly creature; it had slipped my mind. Kitty, you will just have to go.”

“But why can’t Lizzy go?” whimpered Kitty. “After the first one tried to bite me, the other dog chased me round and round. I am sure it wanted to bite me as well!”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes at Jane as if to say *see what fun you have missed while in London*.

“Not to worry, Kitty,” said Elizabeth charitably. “I will go and save you the trouble of being attacked by such savage little beasts.”

“What can you be thinking of Miss Lizzy,” shouted Mrs Bennet, her face twisted with incredulity. “You know Mr. Darcy comes to visit us in several days. Do you actually think I would let you out of this house? No, I have not yet lost all my faculties no matter what your father may think. You will only catch your aunt’s cold and then your looks will be gone and then where will we be? I’ll tell you where—we will be starving in the Collins’s hedgerow. I will not have Mr. Darcy taking one look at your altered appearance and changing his mind.” The handkerchief was then applied to her dry eyes for effect as she whined, “Lady Lucas would never let me hear the end of it and I would have to listen to all her unkind comments for the rest of my days.”

“Mamma,” said Elizabeth archly, “I hardly think she would call on us while we are actually starving in the hedgerow?”

Mrs Bennet, purposely not hearing her second daughter’s sarcastic comment, exclaimed, “No, no, Kitty will go! That is my final word. Besides, no one is coming here to look at her!”

Hearing that, Kitty burst into tears and ran from the room.

Jane, sensible of Kitty’s delicate feelings and knowing the secret that Mr. Darcy would most likely turn up at their door on the morrow, spoke and put an end to everyone’s misery. “I will go mamma so that Kitty may stay home. After all, no one is coming here to look upon me either.”



“Miss Bennet would never look twice upon me.”

“And why do you say that?” asked Lord Matlock as he turned to study his own reflection in the mirror. “You are your father’s son, are you not? Good-looking, an avid sportsman, highly entertaining, and you tell such humorous tales. The ladies all love your amusing little stories.”

“Oh lord, father; if I had to pick a wife by how many times a woman laughed at one of my *amusing little stories*, I could have had a hundred wives by now.”

Lord Matlock, distracted by his image in the mirror, sucked in his paunch and smoothed back his grey hair, thinking of the dashing figure he once cut long ago. “Well, here is our chance to make Miss Jane a member of the family. What do you have planned?”

“Now Father, you know perfectly well that I have no thoughts towards marriage.” He arose and stepped over to the brandy decanter once again. “I have always observed that a lady is never happy unless a man can keep her in feathers and silks. Think of mother, think of Adele. They talked of nothing but fashion all throughout dinner. I can not imagine what you pay for Adele’s millinery bill alone. Besides,” added the Colonel, taking on a look of woe, “how can I ever hope to keep up; poor fellow that I am.”

The Earl became excited, thinking that if this was all that was required, he’d settle the matter at once.

“Let that be no hindrance for us. I believe I can see my clear to... uh... *increasing* your yearly allowance by say another two...” (he coughed as Jonathan stopped pouring the beverage in his glass and raised a single eyebrow) “...three...” (Jonathan looked at his father askew) “...five hundred? That is my final offer!” he shouted.

“You know, that’s what I like about you, Father, always so obliging.”



With the matter of Aunt Philips settled, and after all the muslins seen in the London shops had been described in full detail, Jane Bennet was finally allowed to make ready for bed.

She’d had a very tiring day and looked forward to laying her head down on her own pillow in her very own bed after being away for so many days. She was just about to blow out her candle, when Elizabeth’s tell-tale knock was heard on the door.

“Yes, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth peeked round the door. “Do you mind if I come in for a moment?”

“No, not at all; I’ve missed our night-time conversations.”

“I too.”

Noticing her sister’s bare feet, Jane held back the covers to let her in.

Getting in the bed, Elizabeth propped herself upon one elbow and said, "I am sure if you would have asked," said Elizabeth, teasingly, "Maria could have been prevailed upon to be a suitable replacement?"

"Oh yes, Maria kept me highly entertained," smiled Jane, "for she is now a grown-up young lady and having fallen in love she sought me out several times for a chat."

Elizabeth laid her head down on the adjacent pillow and laughed, saying, "And who is this young man who has captured her heart? That adorable young clerk in my uncle's office."

Jane laughed. "No, young Mr. Tyler is now perfectly safe from Maria adoring attentions. Let us just say that Kitty and Lydia are not the only young ladies in our family who have a fondness for a gentleman in uniform."

Elizabeth knitted her brows together. She could not immediately think of a military man of her Aunt Gardiner's acquaintance. Then it suddenly dawned on her when she remembered in whose company her sister had been in the last several days.

"Not Colonel Fitzwilliam?" asked Elizabeth, laughingly.

"Indeed," said Jane smiling while laying her head down on her pillow. "Maria talked of nothing else since meeting him. She has almost convinced me that such a shy, quiet man can be quite a charmer."

Elizabeth rolled over to stare at Jane directly. "Colonel Fitzwilliam? Shy? Quiet? Now, Jane, that is the second time today you have said that of the gentleman and I can not account for such a thing. You forget that I have come to know the Colonel quite well and I would never describe him in such a way. I know I must have told you of our meeting in Kent; he talked a great deal and with spirit to both Charlotte and me. He made my visits to Rosings Park very enjoyable."

"Yes, that is what surprised me the most when I met him. I did recall your saying how interesting and amusing he was to talk to. But believe me, Lizzy, when I first meet him I don't think he said more than three words together and then not until Miss Darcy's dinner several days later."

"And that is another thing, Jane, how come you to think of Georgiana as standoffish with you. I admit that when I read that in your letter it took me by surprise. Now, as for shy, she is the very essence of reserve, however, I can not believe she would form an ill opinion of anyone. You two should have got on famously; you are so alike in many ways."

"Lizzy, I only speak of my own observations on first meeting the two people in question. As the days went on, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Darcy were much more open with

me. It can not be easy to meet so many strangers all at once; not everyone has your ease in society.”

Elizabeth thought about Jane’s statement for a moment and tucked that information away to think on later.

“And the rest of the Fitzwilliam’s; tell me more about them.”

“As I said before, Lord and Lady Matlock were very pleasing, especially Lady Matlock. She went out of her way several times to see to my comfort.”

“Oh? How so?”

“She sent her carriage for me and the children one day, just for a simple excursion in the park with her daughter, Lady Adele. And afterwards back at her house in Mayfair she saw to my every relief. I had had... some minor difficulty on our outing.” Jane lowered her eyes.

Seeing that Jane was not immediately forthcoming and hoping to glean more information out of her sister concerning what she had read in the newspaper, Elizabeth simply stroked Jane’s hand to encourage her.

Jane sighed. “It was nothing, really, Lizzy. I was just out of sorts for a moment and that is all. Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were there in the park.”

Elizabeth’s temper flared. “After treating you so abominably on your last meeting, what could they possibly have to say to you?”

“They said nothing. They did not even approach me; they only nodded in greeting from a short distance away.”

“I wish I could have been there. I hate to see you distressed about anything.”

“Do not concern yourself, Lizzy; it was over almost as soon as I saw them. It did distress me a little at first; but Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lady Adele saw me to the carriage and all was well.”

It took several long moments for Elizabeth to calm herself. The hypocrisy and the insincerity of the Bingley sisters agitated her greatly. However, she soon regained a little of her composure and continued to canvas her sister about the Fitzwilliam family.

“You mentioned the colonel’s sister. What was Lady Adele like?”

“She is so very elegant and accomplished. Her performance on the harp is simply breathtaking. Oh, Lizzy, I wish you could have seen her--such lovely clothes--hardly surprising considering her father is an Earl.”

“And the Viscount? You mentioned him before. How old do you think he is?”

“I shouldn’t think him above thirty-five or forty; why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” said Elizabeth, who just that moment had a fleeting thought of their Netherfield neighbour and wondered if either Lord Whitfield or his brother had found their way into her sister’s broken heart. She knew what the colonel looked like and now she ached to know the same of his brother. “And is he handsome?”

Jane hesitated and blushed. “So many questions, Lizzy!”

“Now Jane, you know if Mr. Darcy were here I would ask him, but since he is not, you must satisfy my curiosity; just answer this last one and I will have done.”

Jane sighed deeply. “Yes, Lizzy, he is handsome.”

“Just handsome or very handsome?”

“Lizzy! You said only one more question,” laughed Jane. “You must let me go to bed for I am very, very, tired. I have to be up early to see to Aunt Philips.”

“All right then, if you insist,” said Elizabeth playfully. “I guess I will just have to wait and see what he looks like for myself.” She kissed her sister and hopped out of bed.

“Good night, Lizzy.”

“Good night, Jane.”



When the colonel returned to the Darcy’s home that evening (exceeding happy with his improved situation in the world) he could hear his young cousin playing some gloomy, melancholy tune at her instrument.

He entered the music room and Darcy looked up from several books he was sorting through and instantly met the Colonel’s eye. Jonathan merely raised one eyebrow to put the question. Darcy simply shook his head as if to suggest that he should not press the matter.

Georgiana stopped playing as soon as she saw the colonel and ran over immediately to embrace him. Laying her head on his shoulder, she cried, “Oh, Jonathan, did Adele tell you my sad news; isn’t it just awful? How I shall miss Mrs. Annesley’s company.”

The colonel, all sympathy, said nothing and only nodded while stroking her hair.

She worried his collar then looked up with her tear-filled eyes, sniffing slightly. “I thought you would never come home. I so wanted to talk to you. What kept you so long?”

“I was obliged to play the role of the dutiful son,” said Jonathan with a laugh. “And as you well know that requires several long and tedious hours when dealing with my father. Did not my brother tell you that I’d be dining with my parents?”

“Yes, Lawrence made your excuses, but I expected you ages ago. I so much wanted to talk to you about Mrs Annesley, but now, you too are going away.”

“Oh, am I?” said the Colonel holding Georgiana out at arms length as he turned round to peer at his cousin Darcy. “Tired of me so soon?”

“Change in plan. My business in town is not so pressing at present. I thought I’d seize the opportunity of travelling to Hertfordshire tomorrow morning.” Darcy smiled to himself as all men in love generally do. “Lawrence is upstairs preparing for the journey now. Do you still wish to make the journey with me?”

The Colonel was now torn. Georgiana was distressed and needed comforting. However, he also understood Darcy’s wish to see Elizabeth Bennet. In truth, he wished to see Jane Bennet just as much.

“But Darcy, surely *we* can not leave Georgiana just now when she is so aggrieved.”

Georgiana snapped at her cousin. “John, what can you be thinking? Do you really believe I would keep my brother from Elizabeth’s side for one moment longer? Yes, I am sad at the thought of Mrs Annesley going away, but I am not as selfish a creature as you obviously think me!”

The colonel was taken aback. He had no idea where he went so wrong and how he came to be in his young cousin’s bad graces so quickly.

“I only meant—I thought—surely your brother--. Are you not going to help me out of this one, Darcy?”

“No, for I received the exact same lecture from my sister when I had thoughts of postponing my trip for her sake. Georgiana’s mind is quite made up on the matter.”

“I am sorry, dear cousin,” said the colonel turning back to Georgiana and smiling ruefully. “I did not mean to imply that you were selfish. You will, of course, forgive me?”

Georgiana gave her cousin a look of triumph, folded her arms and said, “Oh no, you don’t get off so easily, sir. To make it up to me, once my brother is settled, I will require

*you* and not my brother to come fetch me, your sister, and Mrs Annesley down to the country. That way my Fitzwilliam can spend more time with Elizabeth.”

“Do I have any choice in the matter?”

“No,” said Georgiana shaking her head and smiling prettily.



Darcy, Lord Whitfield, and Colonel Fitzwilliam set out very early in the morning. The brothers could feel the palpable tension in the air. Not only because their cousin had insisted on them traveling earlier than originally planned, but because Darcy urged his coachman not merely once or twice, but several times over the course of the morning to pick up the pace.

A little before noon, the carriage pulled into Meryton. The more inquisitive of the three gentlemen inside looked out of the glass at the surroundings just as the coach pulled before the inn.

“So,” said the Colonel noticing several members of a local militia idling about, “this is the sort of place that produces such women as Jane and Elizabeth Bennet.”

It was a rhetorical question to which he did not expect an answer. Darcy was busy gathering his gloves and his brother was checking his pocket watch.

The door was opened, the steps were let down and the curiosity to the townsfolk was to be expected. The residents of Meryton knew perfectly well whose carriage had just arrived, yet, they were all in a quandary as to why it would be in front of the inn instead of heading for Netherfield Park or Longbourn Manor.

Darcy alighted first and met the smiles of recognition of several passers-by. The Colonel observed that some merely nodded or tipped their hats, while once or twice his cousin was greeted with a kindly ‘Good morning, Mr. Darcy’.

Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped out next and was no less noticed. He threw his great billowing black cape over one shoulder and militiamen here and there suddenly snapped to attention at the view of so much gold braid and gleaming brass.

“You just love doing that, don’t you?” said Darcy shaking his head at his cousin.

“Never hurts to let the little people know who is who.”

Lawrence came next, and with his tall, dark, good looks, several of the townsfolk whispered behind their hands, remarking that this new stranger and Mr. Darcy could almost pass for brothers.

They were immediately greeted by Mattingly, who, having been sent on ahead with the luggage and Preston, Colonel Fitzwilliam's batman, had been on the look out for his master.

"Good morning, sir. I have secured several rooms as you requested; right this way if you please."

The gentlemen followed the servant upstairs with Darcy entering one of the chambers after his valet showed his cousins the other.

Lawrence, who had no desire to send a personal servant, had been offered the services of both Mattingly and Preston, who was already busy sorting his own masters various red coats when the two gentleman entered.

"Ah, your Lordship," said Preston, clicking his heels respectfully, "I have your things at the ready, if you will only follow me."

Lawrence, never one to care much for the particulars of dress, did not require Mr. Preston's services for long and soon after, Preston was back with his Colonel as he knew the Colonel's penchant for requiring special attention to his wardrobe after a long journey.

When Preston entered, the colonel was fingering two coats laid out for his inspection. "What do you think, Preston, this one or the other?"

"I received intelligence from Mattingly, sir, that Mr. Darcy's intended is from a large family of daughters; so naturally, it must be the silver braid, you must look your best to please so many feminine eyes."

The Colonel scratched his ginger whiskers and agreed. "Yes, you are right. Come, help me out of these clothes."

Preston removed the cloak and hung it on back of the door. He then eased the coat gingerly over his colonel's wounded arm. Next, he carefully unwound the scarlet sash, folding that item meticulously and placing it at the foot of the bed. The colonel was then shown through a door that led to a small side chamber where he could refresh himself after his journey. He had not been in this ante-room ten minutes when there came a great pounding upon the bedchamber door. Preston opened it and peered out into the hall, staring up at the impatient visage of the colonel's tall and imposing brother.

Lawrence shouted through the door. "You have five minutes, Jonathan, or Darcy and I leave you where you stand!"

Jonathan stepped out from the ante-room; his muscular chest exposed. His damp skin glistened from his hurried bath as he slowly pulled on a crisp white shirt. "Not before time, brother, not before time," he mumbled to himself more than to anyone else.

Lawrence hurried off in a huff to meet with Darcy who was already waiting downstairs. After telling his cousin the state in which he had found his brother, Darcy rolled his eyes and they went off to settle themselves in the awaiting carriage.

Darcy had just opened an old newspaper, when the sight of a familiar person caught his eye. Bingley was stepping out of a shop up the road. His friend appeared in health, although his clothing seemed slightly rumpled, but nothing too out of the ordinary for a country gentleman... if that country gentlemen looked after his own livestock.

“Excuse me for a moment, Lawrence,” said Darcy as he set the newspaper aside and quickly stepped out. Dodging several horses he crossed the busy road and lifted his walking stick to hail his friend. “Bingley!”

Bingley stiffened at the familiar address and for the briefest moment thought to ignore the call of his name. Unfortunately it appeared fruitless as Darcy was very near. When Darcy finally stood before him, Bingley touched his riding crop to the brim of his hat in salutation.

“Darcy.”

“Charles!” Darcy couldn’t help but smile, the absence of his friend was felt acutely. “How are you?”

“As you see.” Bingley did not smile; he only grimaced slightly.

Darcy’s smile faltered a bit at such a greeting. “I-I am just arrived--from London.”

“And on your way to Longbourn, no doubt,” he replied blandly.

“Yes. Well, not at first, I have business elsewhere. But then I travel on to Longbourn. I have not seen Elizabeth for quite some time.”

“How unfortunate for you,” he said showing no signs of sympathy as he looked off into the near distance, seeing a lone figure sitting in Darcy’s carriage.

“Yes, well, as you can imagine, I am eager to be in her company once more.” A thought suddenly popped into Darcy’s head. “My business with Mr. Philips should not last more than two or three hours. Why don’t you join me at Longbourn then; I am certain Mrs Bennet would welcome your company, as always.”

Bingley, unnerved by the occupant of the carriage, looked left and right. “No, no—I am engaged this morning—I can not possibly spare the time.” Bingley touched his brim once more and started to edge his way away towards his horse, but Darcy stopped him.

“Charles, please, this is ridiculous,” said Darcy, exasperated. He placed his hand on Bingley’s shoulder. “You are my oldest and dearest friend and if we can not carry on the most trivial of conversations--.”

Bingley shrugged away from all contact. “I don’t really have time for this now.” He strode off; Darcy followed until they were both standing by Bingley’s horse.

“Can you not wait but one moment? My cousins, Lord Whitfield and Colonel Fitzwilliam have both journeyed up with me especially to make the acquaintance of the Bennet family. I know the Colonel would welcome the opportunity to see you once more.”

*So, the both of them were in Meryton,* thought Bingley. He scowled at the mere mention of the Fitzwilliam brothers; Miss Mary’s conversation of several days previous came unbidden to his mind and nipped angrily at his insides. William Goulding was one thing, this new situation was quite another. “*I said* that I was busy this morning!” He gathered up the reins and mounted.

Undaunted, Darcy pressed Bingley further. “Then might I call upon you this evening or tomorrow, perhaps?”

Bingley scoffed at Darcy’s determination. “Why? I would think that since you are now to be reunited with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, you would have very little time for me. Then again, since you have ruined my life, I expect you assume that I now have nothing whatsoever to do.”

The crop was applied and Bingley trotted off in the direction of the Netherfield road.

Darcy, frustrated, sighed heavily and stared after his friend. He really missed Bingley’s company and wanted nothing more than for their friendship to be what it once was. He turned round and slowly made his way back to the carriage where he found a smiling and refreshed Colonel Fitzwilliam standing beside it smelling of sandalwood and sage. The colonel had noticed the gentleman who rode off.

“Was not that your particular friend, Mr. Bingley? I should have liked to meet with him; such a capital fellow. Mother had some notion of me coming down to shoot with him. Could you not urge him to stay?”

“No, I could not,” said Darcy, testily.

“Pity,” replied the colonel, not noticing his cousin’s ill-humour, his mind full of the attractive image he would soon present to Miss Jane Bennet. “Well, shall we,” asked the Colonel gesturing to the awaiting carriage.

Darcy sat next to Lawrence and opposite the colonel. He took a long, critical glance at his red-coated cousin.

“We’re here to look over houses, Fitzwilliam, not spending the afternoon escorting debutantes at Lady Carteret’s garden party.”

The Colonel merely smirked as Darcy rapped on the roof of the carriage and the coachman set off for their first stop, Mr. Philips place of business.

Lawrence said nothing—heard nothing; he was far too busy reading an article in the newspaper concerning himself, his family, and a mysterious woman unknown to the publication who could only be Miss Jane Bennet.