

## Chapter 19 ~ In the Middle Before He Knew It



The distance between Meryton and London was, for the most part, a very easy one. The hired chaise, although not the most comfortable of equipages, proved adequate for the journey. It arrived, without incident, before his parent's London house just before early evening.

At the door he was greeted by old Kingsley who had been butler to the Fitzwilliam family since the Viscount's grandfather's time. When the old earl had passed on, Kingsley had never quite gotten used to the idea of adding the title of *lord* to the then twelve-year-old viscount's name. And he never had.

"Master Lawrence? Sir?"

Lawrence regarded the servant's puzzled expression and immediately determined to put an end to any thoughts of something being amiss. "I found that I missed everyone, so here I am. How are you, Kingsley?"

Kingsley brightened at the younger man's notice. "Very well, Master Lawrence. Your mother told me that you were in Hertfordshire, court—." He stopped himself; he had nearly said courting, but, realizing the indignity of sounding like a gossiping chambermaid, changed his tack. "Your mother said that you were in Hertfordshire, sir." He took the young master's coat and laid it over his arm before accepting the gloves and beaver. "I trust your journey back to London was uneventful."

"It was; although the carriage I came down in has seen better days." Lawrence brushed at the dust on his clothes. "I shall require the services of my father's valet before supper. Will you see that it is arranged?"

"Very good, sir." Kingsley was just turning away, when Lawrence stopped him.

"Are all the family at home?"

"Your mother is above stairs in her sitting room; your father is expected home at any time; Lady Adele and Miss Darcy are in the music room, and your children are having their supper in the nursery, sir," said Kingsley.

"Very well; I shall go to my mother now."

The old butler slowly shuffled forward. "I shall announce you, Master Lawrence."

"No, no, do not trouble yourself on my account. Go and have your tea."

Lawrence hurried off and took the stairs two at a time and was soon knocking softly upon the sitting room door.

“Come.”

When Lawrence entered, the countess was instantly on her feet, alarmed by his sudden and unlooked for appearance.

“Lawrence, heavens! Why are you here?” However, before she would let him say anything, she rushed forward. “Has something bad happened in Hertfordshire? Is it your brother or Fitzwilliam or Miss Bennet? Tell me at once!”

Lawrence was quick to reassure her.

“No, mother; calm yourself, everyone is well.” He pressed her hands, kissed her cheek, and smiled a smile that did not quite reach his eyes.

“Then why are you here?” asked Lady Matlock, tilting her head to one side knowing as all mothers do when something was not right with one of her children. “We all thought you would be spending several days in the country.”

“I am. I will. More than several days, in fact; I’ve leased a house.”

The impact of the statement and what it could possibly imply slowly dawned on the countess and she smiled, wondering at the reasons for this new development and hopeful that it had everything to do with Miss Jane Bennet. “Well, if being situated in Hertfordshire pleases you then I am very happy. I take it that you will not be going home to the Priory any time soon?” Then her countenance became all teasing, “Surely everyone will call you shamefully extravagant for having *two* homes in the country.”

Lawrence blanched. “Yes, a very large home in the country with far too many servants, far too many responsibilities, and far too many painful memories.” He closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

The countess reached over to take his hand and to give it a gentle squeeze knowing that his thoughts never strayed far from Julia.

“This is a smaller house, mother, a lodge, really. It has an extensive garden and only three servants to look after me.”

At the mention of the neighbourhood, the countess smiled slyly. “Are you very far from the Bennet family?”

“Not at all; Mr. Bennet’s estate is barely two miles away; they are my close neighbours. Darcy has taken a house slightly farther a field and he and my brother will remove there shortly, I believe.”

“I see,” she said smiling brightly at this piece of news. “Then everything is coming together, I see. I assume you will return to Hertfordshire with Adele and Georgiana, then.”

“Pardon?”

“Adele and Georgiana—I know it was settled for your brother to escort them there, but since you are here now, they will return with you, correct?”

The thought had never once occurred to him since he had another motivation for coming to town. Yet, upon reflection it did seem to be the only logical conclusion and Darcy had probably already made that same assumption. He didn’t mind taking them along so long as they conformed to his schedule.

“Y-Yes, of course; as long as they can be ready to go in the morning.”

“The morning? Oh, so it is your wish to return as quickly as possible?” She turned away to finger an orchid, beaming and ecstatic with this turn of events; a Christmas wedding for her eldest was surely now within her grasp. “Of course, Georgiana will have no objection to going with you in the morning; she hardly talks of anything else. It is always Miss Elizabeth this and Miss Elizabeth that. Adele, on the other hand, has a fitting tomorrow and you know how she is about new gowns.”

Lawrence swore a silent oath. Deferring to the needs of his sister had never been one of his favourite things to do and trying to talk her out of what she had set her mind to, he knew very well, was quite impossible.

Trying to sound as neutral as possible the countess continued. “Have you met the rest of Jane’s family?”

“I have met all of them, save one, and you will be happy to know, mother, that Darcy is a very fortunate man. Georgiana is quite right in her praise; Miss Elizabeth Bennet is everything charming, delightful, and lovely.”

The countess’s alarm rose and she turned to him suddenly, “Not as lovely as our dearest Jane?”

It had never occurred to Lawrence to compare the two ladies. “Miss Elizabeth is very pretty, Mother. It is a different sort of beauty from Miss Bennet’s, perhaps.”

The countess’s eyebrows rose slowly. “And how is dear Jane? Have you had many opportunities to be much in company together?”

Lawrence cleared his throat. “A very little; she has been away from home tending to a sick aunt.”

The countess's alarm rose again at the idea of her favourite being put upon. "Jane? In the sick room? What could her mother be thinking?"

"No, mother, nothing like that at all. Her aunt had nothing more than a slight cold, I believe. When I saw Miss Bennet this morning she looked very well."

His manner some became wistful and then just as abruptly, it turned moody. Lawrence ran his fingers through his hair, now appearing downright agitated.

She baited him. "Oh? So you saw Jane just this morning, did you?"

"Miss Bennet and I met in one of the shops, quite by chance. She--" Lawrence turned to stare out the window, obviously ill at ease. He said nothing for several long moments and then added, "I saw her again a little later at her uncle's house. Mr. Philips is the agent for the house I have taken; he invited me to dine with him this afternoon."

Lawrence was quiet again and continued to look out on the street and down to the passing carriages below. As the silence lengthened Lady Matlock observed her son closely. Something was definitely wrong. Lawrence, had always been the contemplative sort, but this was different, this was contemplation coupled with restlessness and something else--shame perhaps?

Lady Matlock stepped forward and touched her son's shoulder lightly. "Is everything all right, my dearest? Are you certain everything is well in Hertfordshire?"

Lawrence slowly turned; his head down. He whispered. "Oh Mother, I've been such a fool. I have been abominably rude and I am sure I will never be forgiven."

Lady Matlock took a step forward and spoke in a whisper herself. "Who will never forgive you, Lawrence? Is it Jane? Why would Jane never forgive you? What have you done?"

"LAWRENCE!" cried Georgiana, forgetting all decorum as she ran forward to embrace her cousin.

"Hello, brother," said Adele, following her cousin into the room and sitting down on the arm of a chair. "This is a surprise seeing you here; we expected Jonathan."

Lawrence acknowledged his sister as Lady Matlock stepped away to ponder over all she had heard her son say.

Georgiana got a hold of one of Lawrence's hands, pressing it while bursting with delight. "Kingsley told us that you were here! How wonderful! Please say that you have come to take us away to Hertfordshire!"

Lawrence smiled slightly as he lightly touched his cousin's cheek with his free hand. "Yes, Georgiana, here I am, come to take you *all* away to Hertfordshire; you, Adele, Mrs Annesley--" he paused before adding, "--and the children."

Three ladies cried out simultaneously in various degrees of astonishment.

"The children?"



Fitzwilliam Darcy, as master of a great estate, had already set into motion all the resources that Pemberley and his house in London had to offer. There was no need of his walking across muddy fields to inspect properties or engaging talkative local servants. He had servants enough of his own to do his bidding and everything that was needed to assure his comfort in Hertfordshire was in the process of arriving that morning or would most likely be in place by the end of the week.

The two gentlemen had, for a few days now, been firmly fixed in Hertfordshire. He, the colonel, and their personal servants had removed to the Great House at Stoke just the morning before. The wedding date had been finally set, several horses and a curricule had been brought up from town, and he half expected the ladies and his cousin Lawrence to appear at any moment. All was well with the world.

Well, nearly all was well. He still had a visit to pay.

"What did you say?" asked the colonel catching a whiff of his breakfast only to immediately push it away with distaste.

"I said, I have a call to pay. I'm sure you can find something to occupy yourself with this morning."

If truth be told, the colonel had much to occupy himself with that morning. It was all the colonel had thought of since Mrs Bennet had mentioned at dinner two days previous that her eldest daughter was due to return home. He and Darcy had purposely stayed away from Longbourn to give the young lady a chance to settle back in while they attended to their own removal from the Meryton inn.

The Great House at Stoke was a welcome change from the small inn. It was no Pemberley or even Longbourn, for that matter. It was small, but pleasant, not the most elegant of furnishings, but it was well kept and comfortable, even if the bright colours of the breakfast room made the colonel's eyes ache.

"A call? I can only assume that you mean to Mr. Bingley. Tell me, Darcy, what is going on there exactly?"

Darcy, who detested disguise, found it especially hard to moderate his voice when he responded with, "I'm sure I-I don't know what you mean."

The colonel, who was no fool especially when his cousin was so visibly uncomfortable, replied, "And I'm quite sure that you do." He paused for a moment, pondering just how to approach the subject of Darcy's particular friend.

"You and Bingley are the best of friends, yet, I haven't heard you mention him once, nor has he called upon us since we have been in Hertfordshire. I know you haven't the time to pull yourself away from Miss Elizabeth's kisses," he smiled mischievously at the remembrance of catching Darcy engaged in just such an activity days before, "but you must own that it all appears a bit odd: you neglecting your duty to your friends."

Darcy cleared his throat. He felt no need to tell Jonathan every particular of his estrangement from his friend, but he also felt he could not continue on with the ruse either.

"Bingley and I have had... a misunderstanding."

The colonel raised an eyebrow as if to ask what sort of misunderstanding.

Darcy looked everywhere but at his cousin. "He—I--we have had a parting of the ways."

The colonel nodded slowly to encourage Darcy to be more forthcoming.

Darcy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "It stems from a mistake I made concerning a certain lady."

"I knew it!" said the colonel, smirking. "One can only assume you mean the lady you *strongly objected to*."

Darcy winced at the colonel's exacting memory. "If you must know, yes."

"Are you ever going to tell me who it is?"

"No," replied Darcy, succinctly.

"Considering your excellent judge of character, she was, no doubt, some conniving harpy."

Darcy shook out the newspaper. He was very uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. Darcy cleared his throat; the words conniving harpy and the image of Jane Bennet could not coalesce in his mind; the guilt of that incident, it would seem, would forever make him uneasy. It only reinforced his resolve to see Jane Bennet made happy and if he needed to throw himself upon Bingley's mercy he would do it.

“It would appear that I was in the wrong. I allowed my arrogance to get the better of me and I misjudged the entire incident. The lady in question, I have since discovered, has never been, using your words, a conniving harpy. I was wrong in passing judgement on so sensible a young woman.”

“Sensible, eh; that doesn’t sound like anyone I know.”

“Can we just let the matter drop, Fitzwilliam?”

“Not until you tell me who she is. Is it Maud Hardwick? She’s Bingley type.”

“No.”

“Amelia Rivers?”

“No.”

“Jane Hutton-Seddley.”

Darcy shouted, “I said drop it, Fitzwilliam!”

To the colonel, his cousin’s tone was far more dangerous than he had ever heard before and it could only mean that he was getting very near the truth. He raised both his hands up in supplication. “Very well, if you insist.”

Darcy took several steadying breathes to calm himself and returned to his paper taking note that his cousin Lawrence’s name was yet again being bandied about in the press.

Intriguing matters continue in the family of Lord M. Speculation is high concerning Lord W’s movements about town. With Mr. D, Lord M’s recently engaged nephew out of London, Lord W has been seen this very afternoon in the company of his cousin, a certain young Miss D and his sister, Lady P. However, the more interesting story lies at another’s feet. Where, oh, where is the ravishing beauty so recently seen on the arm of Lord W’s military sibling? This publication can only wonder as to the distress of every young lady at breakfast this morning at the thought of three such eligible gentlemen on the verge of being permanently off the marriage market.

“Good lord! It’s one thing to see my name in the papers, quite another to see my own sisters.”

“What could they possibly have to say about Georgiana?” asked the colonel, nonchalantly.

“Apparently the newspapers seem to think that *your brother* is courting her.”

“My brother? Paying court?” Despite his raging headache, the colonel laughed heartily at this. “Oh, is that all? By your countenance you would think they had eloped together in a packet boat. Even you can not believe my dour, unromantic, and dreary brother has the slightest interest in Georgiana... or any other woman, for that matter!” The colonel laughed again, even more loudly this time.

“Well,” said Darcy eyeing his cousin sardonically, “See if you find it so amusing when you see that you are also mentioned.”

The paper was immediately snatched from Darcy’s hands and scanned over quickly until the colonel found the reference to himself. He didn’t have to wonder who the lady was who the paper had referred to. The only ravishing beauty he had been in the company of in the last week was none other than Miss Jane Bennet at the park. It was a good thing that his name was often in the papers connected to one young lady or another as it prevented his cousin Darcy from displaying anything like curiosity.

“So,” asked Darcy, wiping his mouth on the napkin and ready to take his leave, “What do you plan to do with yourself today?”

The paper was forgot and cast aside. “I think it is high time I got myself back upon a horse, don’t you think? A colonel of Dragoons who cannot ride a horse gives a very bad impression.”

“But I thought--your leg...?”

“Why is everyone so concerned for this blasted leg of mine?” snapped the colonel. “You all seem to think that I will content myself with spending the rest of my days playing the cripple.” At Darcy’s irritated look, the colonel calmed himself. “Preston has been treating it with this perfectly horrid smelling balm; so I am on the mend. A bit of country air and exercise is all that I need right now.” His whole attitude changed as he smiled mischievously and added, “I might even ride over to Longbourn and make a nuisance out of myself by drinking tea and staring at all if Mrs Bennet’s *ravishingly* beautiful daughters.”

Here Darcy was presented with an opening to discuss something had been on his mind since his conversation with Elizabeth. “You really should take care there, John.”

“Take care? Exactly why must I take care *there*, as your say?” replied the colonel, hoping that he had not been so unfortunate as to appear transparent.

Darcy sighed, hating the role that he must now cast himself in. “Miss Catherine may not be the most intelligent girl in the county, but you, Fitzwilliam, you are a person of the world and, to put it simply, Miss Catherine is not. It would grieve me greatly to see my new sister’s feelings hurt and through her, Elizabeth’s.”

The colonel lost all composure. “Oh yes, how could I possibly forget? Everyone knows that I am *forever* injuring a young lady’s feelings. It is so good of you to remind me. Next you will be comparing my *perceived* misdeeds with those of your *brother* Wickham.”

At Jonathan’s highly offended look and mention of Wickham, Darcy looked away. He could not fathom how they had both come to the verge of starting an argument; they had always been on such easy terms before. The only course before him was to apologize. “I did not mean to imply that you—I mean—I beg your pardon.”

It took a minute or two, but Jonathan’s featured softened. He knew in his heart that his cousin hadn’t meant anything by his statement. By marrying into the Bennet family Darcy now had more than one sister to look out for: he now had several.

“Come, Darcy,” said the colonel, a smile now on his face, “Let me put your mind at rest. I can safely assure you that I haven’t any designs on injuring Miss *Catherine’s* feelings, nor any others.” And the colonel meant it, too, with all his heart, for if things worked out as the hoped, he would soon have reason to call Darcy’s new sisters as his own sisters, as well.



As Jane and Sarah arranged the china cupboard, it was her mother’s endless talk of having been visited by the two gentlemen from Matlock that proved trying for even Jane’s usual good-natured well-being.

Jane had wanted nothing more than to engage her mind in some simple activity that would afford her the opportunity to think. It had been two days since she had spoken to or seen the Viscount and now, upon arriving back home, she had learned he was gone away to London. This unsettled her greatly, for she, as yet, had not had the opportunity to apologise and did not know whether the chance would ever present itself again.

“It is clear that Kitty likes him very much and the colonel seems to admire her, too. And why should he not? Kitty is perhaps not the brightest of all you girls, but she does make up for that in good humour and a pleasing disposition. And if we can but curb her inclination for coughing at the most inconvenient times, I am sure the colonel would be well satisfied to have her as his bride.”

Jane dismissed Sarah and closed the cupboard door a little more firmly than was required. She exited through the butler’s panty, and went into the dining room to refresh the flower arrangements there. Her mother, oblivious to Jane’s disinterest with the topic, followed closely behind her, only to begin speculating wildly about Mary.

“Perhaps a Viscount is a little too high to aim, to be sure, but he spoke very kindly to your sister, Mary, and they seemed to have much to talk of, even though I don’t pretend to understand half of what they say! Just think, Jane, you may very well call your sister

Lady Whitfield one day! Oh, I cannot wait to see the look on Lady Lucas' face if just such a thing would come to pass! Imagine that: Mary, a Viscountess! Do you hear that, Jane? A Viscountess!" Mrs Bennet immediately stopped talking when an even more startling discovery was made. "Mary, the *Countess* of Matlock!"

Her mother was now so caught up in a fit of happy raptures that she had not noticed that Jane had now moved to the opposite side of the room. Jane took up a pair of scissors and began snipping at the ends of a few stems there. Her mother, regaining her equilibrium, talked on as before.

"Lady Lucas called on us the other day saying that she only came by to say hello. As if I believe that! More than likely she only called to catch a glimpse of the two gentlemen. Charlotte may have carried off Mr. Collins, but if Lady Lucas thinks I will let Maria have either of the Fitzwilliam brothers she has quite mistaken the matter! Just think Jane, Lizzy has caught Mr. Darcy; Kitty has *almost* caught Colonel Fitzwilliam; and Mary may have a chance to catch Lord Whitfield." Mrs Bennet's expression soured as she added, "And if you would only put aside your little... *"misunderstanding* with Mr. Bingley..."

Jane silenced her mother with an incredulous, wide-eyed look and a heavy, exasperated expulsion of breath. She could not believe that after all these weeks her mother *still* meant for her to have Mr. Bingley. Stepping away from the flowers, Jane went into the drawing room instead. And no sooner had she sat down and taken up her embroidery, her mother, hard upon her heels, entered the room and sat down in the chair opposite.

Uncharacteristically, Jane sighed slowly and deeply, impatience evident in every feature. This caused her father, who was reading in the chair beside his wife, to glance up. He had spent a great deal of time with Jane of late and began to know her moods so well that he immediately knew when something was wrong. His eldest daughter was downright restless since her return from the Philips' and her demeanour showed a decided lack of calm.

He noticed that Jane's manner seemed to sink further into the depths of impatience when Mary came into the drawing room. Mary had taken up a position in the window seat next to Kitty. Mary had found a passage from Fordyce's Sermons on the evils of young ladies mingling too much with young men and was most eager to share it with everyone. Kitty, however, was most eager that it was not.

Kitty, who had been watching for the colonel from the window, soon grew tired of the sound of Mary's voice and proximity. She moved to the settee and sat down by Jane, immediately upsetting the sewing basket which sent the contents flying about in several different directions. Kitty bent over to retrieve the spools of thread and was immediately seized with a violent coughing fit—a coughing fit that only succeeded in giving Mrs. Bennet another opportunity to complain.

"Oh, for heavens sake, Kitty, have you no compassion for my nerves?"

Elizabeth, just in from a walk, now entered the drawing room. Kitty took one look at Elizabeth's flushed and glowing face, and could only think of the last time she had seen Elizabeth flushed and glowing. This naturally led Kitty's thoughts to Mr. Darcy and when she thought of Mr. Darcy, she could only picture him kissing her sister Elizabeth beneath the ear. And when she thought about Mr. Darcy kissing her sister, she fancied that she would like Colonel Fitzwilliam to perform just such a service for her. And when Kitty thought about the colonel doing exactly that, she coughed even more.

"There you are, Lizzy," cried Mrs Bennet upon seeing her now favourite daughter enter. "Are we to expect the gentlemen to call today? They have all stayed away for far too long."

Elizabeth looked heavenward. "Now, mama, you heard for yourself just the other evening: his lordship has gone to London and Mr. Darcy and the colonel will be busy relocating from the inn."

"And why should it take Mr, Darcy so long to do that? He is such a rich gentleman that I am sure he has any number of servants to do his bidding. But, I still don't understand why he felt the need to take a house so far away, especially with Netherfield so very near."

Elizabeth saw Jane flinch and gave her sister a quick, sympathetic look as she tried to quiet her mother.

"Mamma—"

"I blame your father, I am sure this is somehow all his fault! And if Jane had not chased away Mr. Bingley..."

"Mamma!"

"...perhaps everything would have been settled by now..."

"*Mamma!*"

"...and I could have had two daughters on the verge of marriage instead of just one."

To Jane, the drawing room, which could usually be depended upon to be a place of peace and quiet in the hours after breakfast, was now a place for the airing of grievances. Jane found herself feeling both oppressed and suffocated and she knew that she needed to get out of the house. She simply set her embroidery aside, arose, and hastily left the room.

So, it was a great surprise to everyone when Jane entered again not some twenty minutes later dressed in her blue habit announcing that she was going on a very long ride.

Mr. Bennet slowly lowered his book and looked over the edge of his spectacles at his eldest daughter. Teasing was his usual way to draw people out, so he tried it with her.

“Getting in a little practice before your great northern tour with your charming new friends?” He laughed heartily at this, thinking of Lord and Lady Matlock’s plan to abscond with yet another one of his daughters into the wilds of Derbyshire.

“Tour?” cried Mrs Bennet. “What tour is that, pray? And what new friends are these? Did my sister Gardiner introduce you to some nice gentleman from town? If you ask me, it would have been much better if someone as rich as Mr. Darcy had performed that office. I am sure he has are any number of wealthy, young gentlemen of his acquaintance to bring to your notice... especially since you are so set upon disobliging me about Mr. Bingley!”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes at the mention of Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Darcy’s money, and his rich friends yet again.

“No, mama!” cried Jane in an exasperated tone of voice. “I have not been invited on any *tours* as Papa well knows; he is only teasing. But I do so desire a ride; it has been so long since my last. I will go now if I may.” She turned to hurry away before anyone could stop her.

“You had better ride Toby, then,” called Mr. Bennet, indicating his oldest and slowest mount. “Nellie has to be re-shod.” His duty now done, the book returned to its original position.

Jane halted her exit but she did not turn around to look her father in the eye. “Actually, Papa, I have already asked Davy to saddle Gawain.”

“Gawain?” exclaimed Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth in unison; Mrs. Bennet, hardly knowing one horse from another, said nothing.

“Yes,” said Jane, turning round, an almost defiant look on her face, “I was hoping to go as far as Beecham Hill; Toby would never do for such a long ride.”

Mr. Bennet shared a quick, cautious glance with Lizzy. They both knew that whenever Jane chose to ride out, she always chose much gentler horses. Gawain was by no means a gentle lady’s mount like Nellie or the slow, plodding mount like Toby. Gawain was one of Mr. Bennet’s best saddle horses and Jane had never before had such a strange inclination.

The spectacles came off, were folded up, and were pointed directly at her. “Are you sure that is wise, Jane? Gawain can be a bit spirited at times--and with you sitting atop him in the side saddle--”

“Oh Papa! There is no need to worry. Have I ever given you reason to worry before?”

“Well, no, you have not. However, I think you had better take Davy with--.”

“Davy?” she exclaimed, “Whatever for? When have I ever required the groom?” Jane, immediately seeing her father’s startled look, suddenly calmed herself and smiled serenely. “Dearest, Papa, I shall be well; truly! Have no fear on my account.”

In the moments that her father spent pondering her arguments, Jane spun round to hurry out the door, her mother shouting after her. “Don’t stay out too long, Jane, for I am sure the gentlemen will call today.”

Elizabeth hesitated for a minute before she arose to follow Jane out. She reached her sister just as Davy was taking away the mounting block. Elizabeth, who had never taken to horses, eyed the large, black beast and instinctively took a step back, not a little frightened by its fearsome appearance.

“Jane, is everything well with you?”

“Everything is fine, Lizzy,” said Jane not looking at her sister as she arranged her skirts. “Why do you ask?”

“I thought—I was thinking that perhaps we might take a walk together instead.”

“But Lizzy, you have only just returned from your own walk.”

“I know, but I can go out again. I would enjoy spending a little time with you.” Elizabeth eyed the great horse warily and thought Jane mad.

Jane saw through her sister’s entreaty. “Lizzy, why is every one making such a fuss? One would think that you are all very content to see me forever complaisant and idle, just like Nellie.” Seeing her sister’s hurt expression, Jane spoke a little more soothingly. “I shall be well, Lizzy; I have always wanted to ride this horse. There is nothing for you to fear.”

Elizabeth eyed the animal again. “I’m not so sure about that, Jane.”

“Well,” replied Jane, impatient to be gone and not a little piqued, “think what you like for I intend enjoy myself.” She applied the crop and trotted off briskly in the direction of the Watford road.



Just as he crossed into the boundary of the park and entered the path leading to the gardens, Darcy paused and peered down into a rather large hole. The hole looked like it had been dug with very little skill or attention to where it was placed. When he looked up again he noticed that there were several other very large holes dug randomly around the entire garden and an axe was cast indiscriminately aside. The grounds of Netherfield,

which had always been very neatly kept, now looked positively dreadful. Darcy wondered at this recent development and whether Bingley was aware of it.

He moved on and was soon standing at the door and presenting his card to a harried looking young servant who Darcy could have sworn he had seen before performing duties well below the station of a footman. Fossett, passing by, was there in an instant, greeting Mr. Darcy very cordially.

“Good morning, Fossett. I wonder, might I have a moment of Mr. Bingley’s time?”

Fossett looked uncomfortable. “Well, sir—Mr. Bingley is indisposed at present.”

Darcy and Fossett both shared a knowing look; words associated with drinking to excess and sleeping the morning away entering both of their minds. Darcy pulled out his watch and saw that it was well past noon.

Fossett sought to show the gentleman at least a little Netherfield hospitality. “You are very welcome to wait for him if you wish, sir.”

Darcy really did not have the patience to wait. What he wanted more than anything was to ride over to Longbourn to see Elizabeth. However, it was because of Elizabeth that he was at Netherfield. He would try one last time to make his peace with Bingley and hopefully pave the way for Jane Bennet to possibly reunite with his friend. This would no doubt make Elizabeth very happy and that was all that mattered at present.

“Well, perhaps I will wait in the library.”

“Of course, Mr. Darcy, but I think I should tell you that Mr. Hurst is in the breakfast room if you care to join him there.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “Hurst is here?”

“Yes, sir; he says he came down for the shooting--only, I was not aware that my master arranged any such activity or expected visitors.”

“Yes, I see,” said Darcy nodding, understanding perfectly what Fossett was trying to say. “I will join Mr. Hurst for some tea, then.”

Fossett bowed and lead the way. When the door opened, Hurst glanced up from his breakfast.

Darcy bowed his head. “Hurst.”

“Darcy.”

Hurst, not bothering to stand, remained seated and continued to scoop food into his mouth. Darcy waited for an invitation to sit. When none was forthcoming, he dismissed Fossett with a nod, sat, and asked the footman attending the table for a cup of tea. Several minutes of near silence passed between the two men where the only thing heard were the loud slurps from Hurst's coffee cup and the scraping of a silver knife and fork across Staffordshire clay.

Once satiated, Chetwyn Hurst leaned back in his chair, removed the napkin from around his neck, and belched unbecomingly. Hurst now regarded Darcy for several long moments before speaking.

"Fossett mentioned that you were in the neighbourhood. Where are you staying?"

Darcy's erect and ever correct form sat up even straighter at the mention of his necessity to take other lodgings. "I've taken a small house about five miles from here--in Stoke."

Hurst sucked his teeth a bit and continued to stare at Darcy. Coming to the rare conclusion that there were some things best left unsaid before others, he turned and nodded to dismiss the footman. When the servant had gone, Hurst said, "Yes, Charles isn't very hospitable these days, is he? You would think it was a great imposition to have me here if you had seen how he behaved when I arrived."

Darcy merely nodded. Hurst had never said so many words before to him in his life and Darcy felt that this was not going to be your garden variety interview.

"By the by, congratulations on your engagement; it has made my life at home so much more *interesting*."

Darcy noted Hurst's use of sarcasm. There was no need to say anything more on that subject; Darcy knew very well what was being alluded to.

"How is Charles?"

"How do you think he is? Guttled would be my answer. It would seem not *everyone* is as fortunate as you in getting a positive answer to their proposals. But I will have to give the young lady credit; the pernicious Miss Bennet has got her revenge."

Darcy rounded in on Hurst angrily. "You talk about a woman who will soon be my sister!"

Hurst barely acknowledged the outburst. "Yes, too bad you didn't think about that before you and his sisters hatched this diabolical plot to make Charles miserable. He has not given up hope of winning the blasted girl. It is always Jane Bennet, this and Jane Bennet, that--Jane, Jane, Jane! It is all Charles can speak of since I arrived. Of course he is in his cups while he speaks of it--."

Darcy turned his head and stared out the window. “No one could feel as badly for the situation as myself.”

Hurst smirked. “You expect me to believe that?”

Using his Master of Pemberley voice, he countered with, “I really don’t care what you believe!”

“But the material point is this, old chap: while you have made off with your *very own* Miss Bennet, Charles has been left in the lurch. You, Louisa, and Caroline have left me to mop up your mess for you. And you call yourself his particular friend.”

Darcy closed his eyes; Hurst’s words were too true and very hard to swallow. For all of Hurst’s lethargic and indolent ways, Darcy had never before acknowledged so perfect a blow. If the hit had been with a foil instead of with words, Darcy suspected he would now be lying dead upon the floor in a pool of his own blood.

“That is why I am here today, to try to talk to him once again and possibly find some way out of this predicament. You may choose not to believe me—and that is fair, you have every right to doubt me--but I am still Charles’ friend and I will always be Charles friend no matter how long he shuns me.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess, for Charles could use all the friends he can get.”



He saw her before she saw him. She was dressed head to toe in a dark blue riding habit and was headed across an open field keeping up a moderate canter. He spurred his mount in her direction, hoping to meet her before reaching the intersection of the next road.

Jane could hear heavy hoof beats coming up beside her. She turned her head slightly and saw Colonel Fitzwilliam galloping up, mounted on a large roan. As he drew near he smiled broadly but did not seem to have the inclination to slow down. In fact, he only acknowledged her with a salute of his riding crop and gave all of the appearance of challenging her to a race.

Jane was astonished. She had never raced anyone before in her life and it had never occurred to her to ever race a gentleman. However, the thought of a challenge thrilled her like no other at that moment.

Gawain, never a horse to be passed, was far from backing down. The horse had sensed the proximity of the other and picked up its speed, never once needing the urging of the crop.

In the very next moment, Colonel Fitzwilliam passed her and seemed to be heading for a large elm up ahead. Jane gave Gawain his head and instinctively crouched down as low as she could in the saddle. Gawain, feeling his freedom bolted forward and passed the colonel's horse with very little effort. The colonel seeing that Jane's horse was now a good three lengths ahead knew when he was bested and graciously gave way.

It took Jane a few minutes to rein in Gawain. When she once again had control, she turned the horse round and met the awaiting colonel under the elm. With her free hand, she lifted her veil and the colonel exclaimed upon seeing such a lovely vision.

“Miss Bennet!”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

So caught up in what he saw before him, it took him a few moments to find the words.

“Interesting horse you have there; it would seem that my cousin has provided me with a donkey.”

Jane laughed and reached down to rub her horse's neck. “Good boy, Gawain. Good boy!”

“Gawain, eh? Now, I feel much better. If I had to be beaten, better to be beaten by one of King Arthur's most capable men. Can you imagine my shame if I had been bested by a horse called Fred?”

Jane laughed delightfully as she continued to pet her horse.

The colonel seized this opportunity to stare openly. He studied her windswept appearance and sighed deeply. He thought she was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld. And he really meant it, too, even though there was mud splatters on her habit, her cheeks blazed with an inordinate amount of colour, and a long lock of her hair had escaped from its confinement from under her hat.

Jane felt his stare and thinking that he must disapprove, self-consciously began brushing away the bits of dirt from her person.

“Miss Bennet, you do look remarkably well this morning.”

She refused to believe him; he was only being polite, she thought. “You flatter me, sir, but I know that I do not; I am sure I look a fright.”

“Then you should look a fright everyday.”

Jane blushed and looked away not quite certain if she should take his meaning literally. And when she finally summoned the courage to glance up, there he sat atop his horse smiling at her as if he knew something she did not.

He saw her uncertainty and changed the subject. "How far do you ride today?"

"Just another mile or so."

"Any place interesting at the end of this mile?"

"Yes, I am for Beecham Hill."

"Beecham Hill?"

"Yes, a pleasant little place not far from here; a ring of stones with interesting symbols carved into them. They are said to have been there for years and years. However the stones are not the only attraction, it has some of the most beautiful aspects in all of Hertfordshire. The ruins overlook a cliff and on a clear day you can see all the way into Bedfordshire, I believe."

The colonel smiled thinking himself in high luck. "That sounds very interesting indeed. Might I accompany you there?"

Jane hesitated for a moment, wondering at the propriety of the thing. However, she soon put all uneasiness aside. Beecham Hill was always full of picnic parties and other travellers taking in the glorious sights. She smiled. "That would be delightful, Colonel."

They rode off together and the colonel could not believe his good fortune. He had only thought to suffer through a trying morning call just to have a few moments conversation with her, but now, to have such a beautiful and captivating woman all to himself was a pleasure he had hardly looked forward to.

After riding for some minutes without speaking, the colonel was the first to break the silence. "Do you often ride this way?" he asked.

"Oh no," said Jane, looking down, but smiling. "I rarely have the time."

"Keeping up with all of your many accomplishments, no doubt," he said.

Jane boldly looked up. "More like helping my mother with the household accounts or arranging the servant's duties; hardly any *great* accomplishment at all."

The colonel became quite serious. "I think you undervalue such a skill; it will help you to arrange all such matters in your own establishment one day."

Jane laughed quietly. "If you say so, sir; but I have often observed, with my own eyes, that most men value a beautiful singing voice and talents at the pianoforte, neither of which I possess, over balancing the books and managing the servants."

"That depends on the gentleman. A reasonable man with a tolerable fortune and a comfortable home would prize a good manager of his household affairs over a pretty singing voice any day."

Jane smiled slightly. "A good thing for Mr. Darcy then, for he shall have a wife quite capable of both."

Her tone was cheerful, yet, he noticed just a slight hint of wistfulness in her countenance as she stared off into the distance lost in thought.

They rode along in silence for a minute or two. He took another opportunity to admire her openly. Yet, after a few minutes of watching her he was certain that if left to her own devices she would break down in tears and he thought he knew why.

"You shall miss your sister, Elizabeth, I think."

Jane started out of her reverie. "Oh yes, indeed; how could I not? Lizzy is my greatest friend." Jane now felt badly for her earlier shortness with her sister.

"But you will be invited to Pemberley very often, I am sure; a nice long visit would serve."

"It would only serve to put me in the way of two newly married people."

She smiled so sadly that the colonel thought only of making her laugh. He stopped his horse causing Jane to stop as well. He brought his mount around to face her.

"That settles it then, you shall come to us at Matlock."

"Shall I?" she laughed lightly. "And does your mother approve of you inviting virtual strangers to her home whenever you choose?"

"Now I know you are teasing me, Miss Bennet. You know perfectly well that my mother would love having you. My father and Adele would both be especially pleased." He had nearly blurted out that he would love it, too.

"Your mother, father, and sister are very kind, sir, but you have not convinced me."

"Well, I assure you that you will love Derbyshire and Matlock. The people there are very friendly and most welcoming. Besides, you must come because I begin to consider you as a member of the family already."

“Oh, really; a member family? What, like some unfortunate fifth cousin, thrice removed?”

“Of course not!” he smirked, playfully, “You could only be my unfortunate *forth* cousin--twice removed.”

Jane laughed gaily at this. The colonel was making her feel so happy and so--she didn't quite know what it was she was feeling—but she knew she liked it very much.

“And how shall you introduce me, sir? Shall you say: This is my wretched thrice removed cousin, down from the country, and proving herself a veritable bumpkin?”

“No indeed,” his voiced deepened and he said slowly, “I would say... this is Miss Jane Bennet, a very lovely and dear, *dear* family friend.”

At his sudden and penetrating look, Jane's breath caught in her throat and she stared down at the reins in her hands.

“You are--you are very kind, sir.”

“It is not only kindness, I assure you.”

Jane could not help but lift her eyes; the colonel's resonant voice and unwavering look would not allow any other reaction.



Fossett had just left him and Charles Bingley could not believe his recent run of bad luck.

Not only had Hurst had the audacity to actually turn up uninvited, but the man had taken it upon himself to be in the way. If Hurst wasn't knocking upon the bedchamber door to awaken him in the morning so they could *talk*, he was sitting with him in the library, or the breakfast room or the drawing room, doing the very same thing.

Then there was the incident in Meryton in front of the Philips' house. If it wasn't enough that he had been bitten by a little speck of a dog, then why would Jane Bennet compound his shame with the necessity of binding up his wound with another man's handkerchief; the very same man who was more than likely making a nuisance out of himself at Longbourn at that very moment.

How it galled Charles Bingley to imagine Colonel Fitzwilliam, the King of the London Flirts, even speaking with Jane Bennet or sitting himself down next to her at table as if it were his right or laughing at some shared amusement, or even, horror of horror, actually being permitted to—to--to touch her! These very same ruminations and imaginings

always ended the very same way for Charles: with Colonel Fitzwilliam bleeding, dismembered, and dead at his feet.

Yet, the thing that now grated on Charles Bingley the most was the fact that Fitzwilliam Darcy, yet another uninvited person, was at that very minute, in his house! The nerve!

Charles now considered the only option that lay open to him. As soon as he was dressed and could manage to slip away unseen, he would exit the rear of the house, make his way to the stables, and be on the road to Longbourn.



The two riders reached Beecham Hill and brought their horses over to a clump of blackberry bushes under the shade of a large oak tree. The colonel dismounted first, tied up both their mounts and then came round to assist Jane down from hers. His arm would protest this extra weight he was sure, but what care he for pain; just to have his hands about Jane's waist for a few moments would be too pleasurable for words.

Unfortunately for the gentleman, Jane forestalled him. She gathered up her long skirts over one arm and jumped down from Gawain's back herself.

Beecham Hill was full of people that day taking advantage of possibly one of the last days of sunny good weather. Several learned-looking gentlemen walked around the circle, pointing with their walking sticks to indicate something of interest or stood off to the side holding a debate as to the rocks formation.

Further along, there appeared to be a large party of young people, enjoying a picnic near the cliff. Suddenly catching sight of a friend, Jane waved and received an enthusiastic wave back from an entire family having a picnic under a tree several yards away.

"My friend, Amelia and her husband," whispered Jane, nodding towards the family of four off to the right. "They live in Stoke very near to you and Mr. Darcy."

The colonel looked over. "Shall you not like to go over to speak to them?"

"A little later, perhaps."

Jane knew what Amelia was like and after the scene with her own mother that morning, Jane was not in the mood for small talk about weddings, wedding clothes, or speculations as to her current companion, so off she went in the opposite direction.

Her friends looked slightly put out that she did not come over greet them, so the colonel felt compelled to wave to them in consolation. He received a slight nod from the lady and an almost unfriendly curt tip of the hat from the gentleman.

Jane slipped off towards a bower and the colonel followed, limping slowly behind.

Unfortunately, it was at this very moment that the long ride began to play havoc with his injured leg and the rocky, uneven ground did not help matters at all. While Jane moved off towards a stand of trees with vibrant yellow leaves, the colonel took the opportunity to sit down on one of the fallen monoliths to rest.

Another sharp pain shot through his leg. Out of instinct and need, he reached inside his coat pocket to remove the small flask he kept there for just such a purpose. He lifted his eyes to Jane, and seeing her consumed with the admiration of nature, he surreptitiously sipped a little of the liquid and quickly put it away. He closed his eyes and took a deep steadying breath hoping that the throbbing in his leg would soon disappear.

After several minutes he opened his eyes again in time to observe that Jane Bennet was no longer in view. In a panic, he jumped to his feet and looked around wildly. He saw her behind him not several feet away, sitting under the shade of a yew tree fashioning what appeared to be a wreath of dried leaves. She turned and glanced up at him at just that moment and gave him just such an open, sincere look that he knew he could not but love her. Poetry was considered the food of love and if it helped him now, all the better.

“Who he was that piled these stones, and with the mossy sod first covered, and here taught this aged tree with its dark arms to form a circling bower, I well remember.”\*

Jane, hearing the colonel’s voice and immediately recognizing the verse, turned once again to look at him and smiled.

The warm glow from her face and the light in her eyes was all the encouragement the colonel needed to continue.

“Fixing his downcast eye, he many an hour a morbid pleasure nourished, tracing here an emblem of his own unfruitful life: and, lifting up his head, he then would gaze on the more distant scene--how lovely it is.”

He stopped and waited for her response.

“Oh, don’t stop there, please continue; you recited that poem so charmingly.”

“Isn’t that the time to stop, when people still find you charming?” He waggled his eyebrows up and down causing Jane to giggle almost girlishly.

“Come now, Colonel Fitzwilliam; I would like to hear the rest.”

“But what if I don’t know the rest? What if those few lines are all that I know?”

“Then I would say it a great shame for I find that poem most inspiring. It is a favorite of mine.”

“Oh well then, if it is the favorite of Jane Bennet’s then I must go on.” He cleared his throat.

“Thou seest, -- and he would gaze till it became far lovelier, and his heart could not sustain the beauty, still more beauteous!”

The last line was said at a near whisper and he ceased his recitation; he could not go on; his heart was now too full.

“I am afraid I have forgotten the rest, Miss Bennet. You see that I am a sad studier of verse.”

To Jane, the words had touched her profoundly and for a minute she almost believed he had been speaking directly to her. She had read those words before, yet, until that moment they never had quite the same meaning.

He waited for her to say something, anything, but she did not. He had only ever read nonsense in her presence before; surely she must now think him everything ridiculous and insincere.

Laying her wreath aside, Jane stood and slowly began to walk towards him. She sat down next to him and remained perfectly still and quiet for several additional moments before sighing deeply. “That poem is very beautiful.”

He simply nodded.

“You puzzle me, sir.”

“Oh?” he said, suddenly afraid of the many directions such a conversation could possibly go. “Do I?”

“Yes, you do. I can tell that you are very fond of Wordsworth just by the way you the poem. You have obviously read it many, many times, yet, you *say* that you forget the words.”

“Well, I...” Blushing at being so obviously seen through, he suddenly leapt to his feet and asked, “Shall we not have a look over this cliff of yours, then?”

Jane blinked in a surprise, but said nothing of his abrupt turning of the subject. She smiled as he helped her up with his offered hand.

“With pleasure.”

When they reached the cliff edge, the colonel, overcome with a natural urge to protect, gently took Jane Bennet’s elbow as she neared the edge.

Jane noticed the way he looked out for her but said nothing. "Look, Colonel Fitzwilliam," said Jane staring off into the distance and repeating the lines of the poem herself. "He then would gaze on the more distant scene. How lovely it is, thou seest? And he would gaze till it became far lovelier, and his heart could not sustain the beauty, still more beautiful. Yes, I see what Wordsworth meant—such sights are very beautiful."

"Yes, very beautiful," said the colonel, only looking at her.

She now pointed. "Do you see the group of hills over there? That is part of Bedfordshire. There, I told you we could see it on a clear day."

Not really knowing why he felt he had to, but he found himself telling her of his own situation. "I have a house in northern Bedfordshire, about thirty miles from here."

Jane turned to him. "Do you?"

"Yes, made over to me by my mother's brother for when I find myself tossed out of the Army and with nothing better to do." He laughed nervously.

"Is your house a pretty place?" asked Jane, smiling up at him.

"Yes, it is very pretty and I will be very happy to live there--one day. Unfortunately, it lacks one very important thing." He nearly said: a family, but he caught himself at the last minute and said laughingly, "Furniture."

This caused Jane to laugh as well. "Furniture?"

"Yes, not a stick of it remains. When my uncle came into his inheritance and built his new house in Dorset, his wife, always frugal and rational, would not be parted from her dusty escritaires and creaking chairs and had it all carted off. I will be made a very poor man after I refurnish the place. I might even find myself obliged to raise pigs to pay for my children's supper."

They both laughed at this; Jane wondering what kind of father he would make and he wondering if his children would favour their beautiful mother.

Jane asked, "So, you mean to leave the army, then?"

"Yes, one day! But certainly not now; not until this war is over."

"But surely—but surely--?"

She did not quite know how to bring up the subject of his injured state. He had no such qualms.

“Would you have me stay at home in England, idle and useless and nursing my trivial wounds, while better men fight in my stead?”

“Well, no—nor would I wish your family to think of you in harms way again.”

He watched her do battle with herself and thought to assuage her fears.

“I am not so badly injured. This old body of mine will heal in no time.” At Jane’s pained expression, he rushed to add, “You speak of my family, Miss Bennet, you must understand, my men are like family--brothers; and I would never have a brother of mine putting himself at risk so I may sit home in comfort.”

Jane did not understand the ways of men very well, but seeing his now solemn and serious air, she sought to lighten the mood.

“Would this be the same home with no furniture? I’m afraid you will not be doing very much sitting.”

He was so caught off guard by her joke, that when he suddenly laughed, it came out in a loud, booming fashion. Jane joined him in laughter but eventually she steadied herself enough to end it with a serene and contented sigh.

A sudden and very loud peal of thunder caused them both to turn their eyes away from each other and up to the sky. A few dark clouds had now crept in promising a brief but violent shower.

Several other visitors to the stone circle ran for the cover of trees or to their assorted carriages to seek shelter. The colonel looked all around him, trying to ascertain where he might safely put Miss Bennet as it began to pour. Grasping her elbow firmly, he pointed to an outcropping of rocks not twenty yards away and they soon found themselves sufficiently protected from the downpour.

Suddenly remembering his manners, the colonel removed his frock coat and offered it to Jane. By the look on her face, he saw that she would surely protest, so he took it upon himself to wrap the coat securely about her shoulders. Just as he was just reaching both arms around either side of her to turn up the collar, there was another sharp peal of thunder which startled them both.

Jane, forgetting herself in her sudden fright, instinctively moved closer to him for protection. She instantly found herself held firmly within the colonel’s arms.

He studied her startled face and thought she looked especially lovely with raindrops on her nose. He then did the only thing that seemed natural at that moment; he leaned forward, ever so slightly, as if to kiss her.

However, Jane never noticed his actions. She was suddenly so mortified at her behaviour that her cheeks flamed a violent shade of red and she immediately took several steps back and stared at the ground. The colonel could only release her and drop his hands down lamely to his sides.

“Forgive me, Colonel. I did not mean to—to impose. I was frightened—the thunder, you see.”

“Of course, Miss Bennet, I was a little frightened myself.” He then chuckled to put her at ease. “But being a man and a soldier, I have no such convenient excuse. How the men in my regiment would laugh to see me startled by a clap of thunder.”

Fortunately for them both, the rain soon eased and the colonel was afforded the opportunity to play the gallant once more. He offered her his handkerchief to wipe her wet face just before he hurried off to retrieve their horses.



Kitty, from her usual location by the window saw them both leading their horses up the drive. Jane, as always, was in full beauty, beaming excessively from her long ride. The colonel, especially with his marked limp, to Kitty’s eyes could not have appeared more dashing.

They both then stopped to face each other. The colonel lifted his hand and began to remove something from Jane’s hair. Jane lifted her hand also and by doing so touched the colonel’s hand with her own.

It was only for the briefest of moments, but to Kitty there was something very intimate in the way they both behaved to one another, almost as if they had reached an understanding. She paled and thought she would faint for she knew in that exact moment that the colonel would never be hers.

Hearing her gasp, both Elizabeth and Mary set aside their books and looked Kitty’s way, noticing her pallid expression.

“Kitty, my love,” asked Elizabeth with concern, “whatever can be the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” replied Kitty, miserably, not fooling anybody for a second. Turning round in her seat, she stared at nothing in particular for several long minutes before bursting into tears and fleeing the room.

Elizabeth and Mary each looked at the other and ran to the window to see what had made Kitty so upset. There was Jane and Colonel Fitzwilliam simply standing in the drive, talking. Nothing about it seemed out of the ordinary, but both sisters knew Kitty well

enough to know that she would take something so innocent as something more than it was.

“Well,” said Mary, being practical as ever, “I hope this will teach Kitty to not be so quick to set her cap at anyone, especially a soldier.



Oblivious to the drama now occurring inside the house, the two people standing out front stood talking, well pleased with each other's company.

“I must thank you again for showing me such a fascinating place, Miss Bennet. I look forward to discovering all the beauties that Hertfordshire has in store.”

“You must come again, Colonel Fitzwilliam; I have never enjoyed a ride as much as I have enjoyed mine today.”

She was just about to ask him inside and offer him some tea, when she heard her name being called very loudly.

“Jane! Jane! Over here!”

There was a great commotion at the end of the drive and Colonel Fitzwilliam turned in time to see his father's most enormous carriage now thundering up the lane. And what a sight it was: several liveried servants dressed in royal blue and four of his father's most impressive matching horses, complete with bright blue feathers atop each gleaming black head.

Moments later, the vehicle stopped, the steps were let down, and like a shot two small bodies bounded out of the carriage and wrapped their arms tightly around Jane's waist.

“Hello Jane, we both missed very much,” exclaimed Edward, smiling happily at once again being in the presence of his most favourite person in the whole world.

“I miss you, too. I miss you, too” cried Delphie, equally excited.

“Did you like your gift? Did you know we are to stay with my father? He says he will have my dog brought down from Grimsby and Delphie's pony, as well.”

Jane crouched down to Delphie's level and embraced the little girl happily on receiving such a flattering welcome. As Edward chatted on excitedly, Jane's eyes sought out the only other eyes she knew that must be on her at that moment. Her smile was so brilliant as she looked up at the man who had paused in the carriage door. She was so occupied in her observance of Lord Whitfield, that she did not notice the approach of William Goulding's curricule.

“My Aunt Adele is here and my cousin, Georgiana, too! But we left them at the house! They said that they will call on you tomorrow!”

On his journey up from town that very morning, Lord Whitfield had wondered at his welcome at Longbourn so much and was so restless that Adele had asked him several times if he was well. But now, his whole being relaxed. There was forgiveness in Miss Bennet’s look; forgiveness and, he hoped--oh God, how he hoped--something more.

“Father said that we should also call on you tomorrow, but Delphie cried and cried so much that my father brought us over at once! Do you see father, do you see? I told you Jane would be happy to see us!”

The colonel had no time to think on the sudden arrival of his brother and the children, for he was far too busy observing the sudden and very surprising arrival of Charles Bingley who now stood off to the side staring only at Miss Bennet. Instantly struck with something that he did not want to believe, he turned back to Jane, confusing bits of the conversation with Darcy from that morning trying to piece themselves together in his brain.

The arrival of such a stately carriage and the sound of children’s loud voices at the front of the house naturally drew both Mary and Elizabeth and they both ran out the front door. Mary, when she had finally taken in the entirety of the scene, smiled in satisfaction.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, could hardly believe what she saw as she studied each and every face. Lord Whitfield, Colonel Fitzwilliam, William Goulding, and Charles Bingley, all at Longbourn at the same time, all staring fixedly at Jane, and all obviously in love.

Jane, to her credit, only had eyes for the children. She fussed over cut fingers, kissed doll’s faces, exclaimed over distances travelled, and marvelled at sights they had seen.

Elizabeth had no idea what to do. She had never seen anything like this in her life. She longed for Darcy to come and make things right. However, before she could come to terms with the circumstances, she was distracted by the very loud and very jovial laughter coming from behind her.

Leave it to this gentleman to find so much amusement in so unhappy a situation. She turned and there he stood, the Master of Longbourn, eyes sparkling with mischief, and doing the one thing Elizabeth would never dream of considering: bidding them all into the house for tea and cake.