Universal Truth

by zebraljb

Summary

A re-telling of Pride and Prejudice, from a Sparkly perspective. Many many thanks and props to Miss Jane Austen, for without her, none of these stories would exist.
Chapter 1

ONE
It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. Or, if his preference run another way, must be in want of a partner to share life’s joys and sorrows.

By the birth of her fifth son, Lynn Harless decided that it was her duty to find suitable partners for her children. Wealthy, well-respected partners. While God had not blessed she and her husband with income enough to set each boy up comfortably, He HAD given her the ambition to make sure they all found partners she could be proud of. Someone she could brag about to her sisters and friends. If they weren’t able to do it themselves, she’d be there to nudge them along.

Whether they liked it or not.

One evening, the men of the family sat in the parlor after dinner, enjoying books or games or whatever struck their fancy. Mr. Harless, a quiet man who normally allowed his wife to run his life and that of his children, sat by the fire reading a newspaper. The oldest son, Joshua, was a tall thin man with soft curls and beautiful blue eyes. He sat with the next son, Lance, playing checkers. As usual, the third son, Howard, sat in a corner reading a book. His parents had next to no hope of his ever leaving the nest, although they’d never admit it. The two youngest sat on the sofa, whispering and actually giggling to each other. Mr. Harless looked at them over the top of his newspaper, shook his head, and rolled his eyes. Nickolas and Justin were fourteen months apart, and two sillier boys had never been seen, in his opinion. Their mother didn’t help matters much; she encouraged their gossip and foppish ways.

“Oh, Mr. Harless!” Lynn breezed into the room, hand clutching at her stomach as she panted for breath. “You will not believe my news. I know you will not, for I could hardly believe it myself!”

“Even if I could believe it, my dear, I will feign shock just to please you,” her husband promised, snapping his newspaper shut.

“What do you think!” Lynn actually whirled around, running a hand through Justin’s hair.

“Mamma, please!” He reached up and patted his dusty blond curls.

“Netherfield Park has been let at last!” Lynn proclaimed. Her husband and two older sons stared at her. Howard sighed and continued reading.

“That’s nice, Mamma,” Lance said finally, exchanging confused glances with Joshua.

“Yes, it is, for it is let by a gentleman from the country! A Mr. Kirkpatrick, I believe. He has arrived with a small party, and, let me assure you, he has such a fortune that I cannot name the amount, on chance of sounding shameful.” Lynn clapped her hands together, walking over to Joshua. She cupped his chin in her hand. “And shouldn’t this Mr. Kirkpatrick fall for my pretty boy? Your eyes and face are enough to win any man’s heart, my dear.”

“Unless his heart does not wish to be won by a pretty boy, Mamma,” Joshua gently reminded her.

Lynn waved her hand in the air. “No one can resist you, dear Joshua. If we could only find a way to be introduced…we could invite him for dinner!”
“Perhaps someone will have a party,” Justin suggested.

“Or a ball!” Nickolas jumped to his feet, towering over his mother by a good five inches. “Please say we’d be permitted to attend.”

“Of course you would! Everyone would be allowed to attend,” Lynn promised.

“We could go shopping!” Justin said excitedly to Nickolas. “For I need a new…”

“ENOUGH.” Paul Harless stood and glared at his wife. “Look at the commotion you’ve caused. My money is being spent on a ball that does not exist, given by a man who hasn’t even moved into the county yet!”

“My dear, you know…”

“I know nothing about balls or shopping or anything else, and I prefer it that way.” Mr. Harless handed the newspaper to Lance. “I know you wish to read this, my boy. I am off to my study. Joshua, I congratulate you on any fictional match you’ve been able to make without even leaving this room.”

“Oh, Papa,” Joshua said, but he grinned as he spoke.

“Good night.” Mr. Harless left the room, and Lynn took his seat by the fire.

“He doesn’t understand,” she moaned, staring at the flames.

“Don’t be sad, Mamma.” Justin put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure this Mr. Kirkpatrick WILL throw some sort of ball, and he’ll have to invite everyone, won’t he?”

“Anyone of substance, at least,” Nickolas added.

“I’m sure I have no interest in a ball,” Howard said. “I much prefer to remain at home.”

“We much prefer it as well,” Justin said, sticking his tongue out at his brother.

Lance opened the newspaper. “Do you mind?” He asked Joshua.

“Of course not. You were beating me, anyway.” Joshua began to put the checkers away.

“I don’t understand why you care about newspapers and books and things, Lance.” Justin came over to lean on the back of Lance’s chair. “It’s so boring.”

“I like to be informed of what’s going on around me, Justin. You should try it sometime.”

“No, thank you.” Justin wrinkled his nose. “I prefer to be informed of important things. New songs. The latest in fashion.”

“Important, indeed,” Lance said, meeting Joshua’s eye and smirking. Joshua rolled his eyes and closed the checkers box.

“Justin, if you only…” Joshua began.

“NOT another lecture,” Justin interrupted. “Mamma, can’t you…” Justin paused as something in the newspaper caught his eye. “Mamma!” Justin grabbed the paper from a shocked Lance. “Look! The militia will be stationed at Meryton starting next week!”
“What?” Lynn yanked the paper from his hands. “Oh, I remember when I was a girl… the militia came into town… there were dances and dinners… I was always fond of a young man in uniform.”

“Just imagine how many men there will be!” Justin said dreamily.

“That is just what this family needs,” Lance whispered to Joshua. “A town full of soldiers.”

“At least it will provide for some excitement,” Joshua pointed out.

“You see the good in everything,” Lance said.

“Perhaps we may visit Aunt next week,” Nickolas suggested. “We haven’t been to Meryton in ever so long.”

“Nickolas, that is a wonderful idea!” Justin beamed at his older brother.

“That is a horrible idea,” Lance said, standing up. “Papa would not approve of you wandering around Meryton while it’s full of strange men.”

“Papa will not care. He is far too busy to concern himself with how we spend our days,” Justin said. “We won’t get into trouble. We will be at our aunt’s.”

“Like you’ll stay in the house,” Joshua said.

“You just don’t want us to have any fun!” Nickolas said almost angrily.

“You’re jealous that perhaps the soldiers will be interested in Nickolas and I, and NOT in you or Lance,” Justin snapped.

“Now, boys,” Lynn said, but made no true effort to break up the argument.

“Yes, that’s exactly it,” Lance said, putting a hand on Joshua’s arm. “We are nothing compared to you, Justin. We’re worried that a complete stranger might possibly be interested in an empty-headed attractive shell instead of us.”

“Right,” Justin said, but he looked uncertain.

“Right,” Lance repeated, grinning. “I’m off to bed, Mamma. Good night.” He dutifully kissed his mother’s cheek. He picked up a lamp and carefully lit it.

“I’ll come as well.” Joshua kissed their mother. “Good night, Mamma, Howard, Justin, Nickolas.”

Lance led the way to the bedroom they shared. After placing a lamp on the bedside table, he turned to Joshua. “I really wonder if perhaps Mamma and Papa didn’t find us in a field somewhere and simply adopt us. Are we truly related to those boys downstairs?”

“They’re harmless, Lance,” Joshua said, frowning. He studied himself in the mirror for a moment. “Perhaps this Mr. Kirkpatrick is already spoken for.”

Lance leaned his chin on Joshua’s shoulder. “Perhaps he is. But mother did say he came with a party. I believe there is someone in that group who will easily fall for your charms.”

“Stop.” Joshua hung his head bashfully, his cheeks pink. “You are just as attractive as I am, Lance. It’s just that I am what’s considered conventionally pretty, and you… are you unique.”

“My eyes are a strange color and are crooked,” Lance corrected him. “You are tall and slender, while
I am short and thick.”

“You are not thick!” Joshua protested. “And I am sure most people would prefer you to my bony frame.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Lance sighed and looked at their reflection in the mirror.

“I realize that Mamma is relying on me to make a good match.” Joshua leaned his head against Lance’s. “Papa, too, although he doesn’t say as much.”

“Underneath it all, I believe Papa wants us to be happy with our partners,” Lance said. “Heaven knows he and Mamma are not what one would call compatible.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Joshua stood up and began to change into his bedclothes.

“I am counting on you to marry well, Joshua.” Lance began to undress. “And then I won’t have to.”

“Perhaps I will not marry until you have found someone for yourself,” Joshua teased.

“Please, no!” Lance said. “I don’t need that pressure.”

They climbed into their beds and Lance put out the lamp. “I am feeling positive about this,” Joshua said drowsily. “I am going to only think good things about this Mr. Kirkpatrick and his friends.”

“Good,” Lance said, although he lay awake for a long time thinking about it himself.

Lance was serious when he’d mentioned to his brother about being adopted. There were times that he felt completely out of place in his large family. He got on best with his father; his father had quickly realized that Lance was the one most like him, and, as he said, “actually had a few brains in his pretty head.” Lance knew he was his father’s favorite. He and his mother often clashed, since Lance had inherited his father’s intelligence and good sense and these were two things that his mother did not understand or value.

Joshua was Lance’s best friend, and he loved him more than anyone in the world. Joshua was the sweetest human being Lance knew, quick to laugh and eager to see the best in everyone, from their mother to their shallow siblings. If there was anyone on the planet who deserved true happiness, it was Joshua. Lynn clung to the idea that Joshua was going to make their fortune, and Joshua’s bony shoulders had held up admirably under the pressure.

Lance tended to ignore Howard. He couldn’t help it. There was not one bit of anything interesting in the young man, although he spent his time buried in books. They were not books of interest, such as histories or biographies. He spent his time reading only things that would “improve” his character, and loved nothing more than preaching about it to his siblings. The younger ones made fun of him, and, to be honest, the older ones ignored him. Howard didn’t seem to notice.

Nickolas and Justin were two sides of the same coin in Lance’s mind. Although Nickolas was older, it was Justin who led, with Nickolas following along in Justin’s shadow. All they cared about was gossip and clothing and social events. They’d barely made it through the few years of schooling required, and Justin was quickly on his way to being known as the village flirt. Lynn encouraged them in every way possible. Joshua might be the key to a fortune, but Lynn favored Justin, due to the fact that he was almost exactly like her.
Chapter 2

TWO

To the delight of most of the mothers within a ten-mile radius, Mr. Kirkpatrick and his party arrived at Netherfield. The entire situation was a mystery, as he was not from the area, and therefore no one could know much about him or his family. There was a rumor that he’d brought only women with him, another rumor that he brought men enough to make up a hunting party, and then a third rumor that he was not planning on staying more than a fortnight.

“I do wish you would have taken up hunting, Joshua,” Lynn said with a sigh one afternoon, fanning herself. “We could have invited him to hunt in our woods. Or perhaps fish in our pond.”

“I’m sorry, Mamma, that I’m such a disappointment to you,” Joshua said, subtly rolling his eyes behind her back. “I’m sure I would be disastrous at both.”

“Would you really want Joshua to perhaps injure himself traipsing through the woods, Mamma?” Lance asked. “Or prick his fingers on a fishing hook?”

“No,” Lynn admitted.

“Here is Papa,” Lance announced, glancing out the window. “I didn’t expect him back so early from his business.”

“I care not for his business,” Lynn almost growled. “For as we sit here, staring at nothing, there are horrible nosy women finding all sorts of ways to get an invitation to Netherfield! I’m sure I do not care to visit without proper introduction. They are scavengers!”

Lance burst out laughing, and even Joshua had to chuckle. “Mamma.”

“Indeed they are!” Lynn exclaimed. “I’m glad I would never do such a thing. And I believe I am tired of the name ‘Kirkpatrick,’” for it is all they talk about. I hope to never meet the man!” Lance and Joshua smiled at their mother’s quick change of heart.

“I’m sorry to hear that, my dear,” Mr. Harless said upon entering the room. “If I would have known such a thing, I would not have invited him to tea on Thursday.”

Lynn stood up, clasping her hands together. “Do you mean this, Mr. Harless? You have met him?”

“Yes. A very gentlemanly sort of person, everything to his liking.”

“What was he LIKE, Mr. Harless?” Lynn asked breathlessly. “Do you think he might be interested in our Joshua?”

“No, Mamma,” Joshua protested, blushing.

“I cannot imagine why not. Joshua’s eyes and mouth and nose are put together in a pleasant sort of way,” Mr. Harless said, and Lance knew he was teasing. “I suppose we will have to find out.”

“Who else is with him, Papa?” Lance asked.

“His sisters. Two. One married, here with her husband, and one unspoken for. Also a friend. I only received a nod from him, so I am sorry that I cannot tell you more.”
“Oh, Mr. Harless, you are a wonderful man!” Lynn cried. “I must go plan the menu for tea.” She dashed out of the room, calling for their cook.

“I think you might have made Mamma the happiest she’s been in a decade, Papa,” Lance said, smiling at his father.

“I try,” Mr. Harless said with a sigh, falling into a chair.

“What do you really think he’s like, Papa?” Joshua asked.

“I think you will like him, son, because he is so easily likeable. Not unlike yourself. He was properly charming and amiable, obviously wealthy without flaunting his wealth.”

“And the others?” Lance asked.

“As I said, I barely got a nod from his friend. McLean, I think the name was. And, from what I gathered, his estate and fortune are larger than that of Kirkpatrick. The sisters were pleasant enough, although nothing like the brother.”

“Will they all come to tea?” Joshua asked.

“I do not know,” Mr. Harless asked.

In the end, it did not matter, for Mr. Kirkpatrick was forced to decline the invitation via messenger the next day, as there were emergencies at Netherfield that needed his attention.

“Oh, now Joshua will never get married!” Lynn mourned.

“Mamma, really,” Lance almost snapped. “You cannot assume…”

“I most certainly can. Why else would God have blessed my boy with such a pretty face?”

“Here’s something, Mamma,” Joshua said, sorting through the rest of the mail. “An invitation, perhaps?”

“Oh, probably,” Lynn moaned, but she sliced the envelope. “Well, this is a nice turn of events! Sir John is having a dinner, with dancing, and we are all invited. I’m sure he means to invite everyone of meaning…”

“…so Mr. Kirkpatrick will be there,” Lance finished for her.

“Did I hear you say dance?” Justin piped up from his seat by the window. “I do so love a dance!”

“I do, too!” Nickolas added. “Mamma, we must go to Meryton. I’m in desperate need of…”

“You’re not in desperate need of anything,” Lance interrupted. “Your clothes are good enough for a country party.”

“Mamma,” Justin whined.

“We shall all go to Meryton tomorrow,” Lynn decided. “I wish to visit my sister.”

“Excellent!” Justin said, beaming. Nickolas smirked at Lance, who sighed and sat back in his chair.
“They’re everywhere!” Justin exclaimed in a near-whisper as they strode by the shops of Meryton. “So handsome in their uniforms.”

“And so tall,” Nickolas added. “It is so difficult to find someone to dance with when you tower over everyone.”

“Mamma, do you think they’re interested in partners?” Justin asked his mother.

“One can never tell, dear, but it does seem that many of them are looking our way,” Lynn said, smiling at her son. “I’m sure you would be of interest to them.”

Nickolas grabbed Justin’s arm. “Let’s stand here and look in this window…perhaps someone will come speak to us.”

Lance sighed. “Mamma, I wish to look in the bookstore, and then I will go on to my aunt’s, if that’s all right with you.”

“Fine,” Lynn said absently, straightening Justin’s collar.

“I’ll go with you,” Joshua said, linking his arm through Lance’s and gently tugging him along the sidewalk.

“I honestly believe Justin does not consider it a day well spent if he doesn’t do SOMETHING to embarrass us all,” Lance griped.

Joshua patted his brother’s arm. “He’s young. He doesn’t know any better.”

“Not because you and I haven’t tried to set a good example,” Lance muttered. “Joshua, Justin’s not that young. He’s definitely old enough to know how to behave in public. Yes, he has every right to flutter those pretty blue eyes and flash that incredible smile of his…but his behavior reflects upon us all.” Lance stopped in front of the bookstore. “You of all people should realize this. If Justin continues this brazen behavior, what decent gentleman will want to align himself with our family?”

“Relax,” Joshua said, patting Lance again. Lance groaned and shoved the bookstore door open.

“Well, I’m sure I will have nothing to be ashamed of when we walk into the rooms tonight,” Lynn declared on the night of the dinner dance. “You all look wonderful.”

“I’m sure I do,” Justin said, tugging at his new light blue velvet jacket. “This color becomes me much more than any of the rest of you.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nickolas snapped, elbowing his younger brother. “Mamma, can we GO now?”

“The carriages are coming round, dear,” Lynn said. She stood in front of Joshua, moving a few of his curls to the other side of his head. “Now, make sure to stand in the light, Joshua. I want Mr. Kirkpatrick to view you at your best.”

“Mamma, Joshua always looks good,” Lance said, and it was true. That night, Joshua wore a suit of dark blue that brought out his eyes and dark hair. “He will not want for a partner all night long.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” Joshua said to Lance, eying his brother’s suit of grey. “I don’t feel you will shame us.”
“Thank you,” Lance said, giving Joshua a gentle shove.

“Oh, that this night was over,” Howard said with a sigh, leaning against the doorway.

“My sentiments exactly, my boy,” Mr. Harless said. “Ah, here are the carriages.”

“Take care not to wrinkle,” Lynn called as Nickolas and Justin ran out the door. She took Howard’s arm and followed her youngest sons.

Justin, Nickolas, Lynn and Mr. Harless rode in one carriage, while Joshua, Lance and Howard rode in the second. Howard moodily stared out the window into the night, occasionally muttering something about “waste of time” and “below my notice.” Lance grinned as he met Joshua’s eye. He knew that part of Howard’s dark mood was pure envy.

As they pulled up into the long line of carriages approaching the party, Lance could only imagine how fretful and excited his brothers and mother were getting. He felt sorry for his father. After about fifteen minutes, they finally pulled up to the front of the line. Justin and Nickolas were smoothing out their suits, and Lynn was chattering away a mile a minute.

“Oh, there you are,” she said to Joshua, as if she hadn’t known they were right behind her the entire time. “Now, make sure you…”

“I’m sure we all know how to behave in public,” Lance interrupted. “Some of us, anyway.” He glared at his younger brothers.

“Come along, my dear. I’m sure Joshua and Lance can find the front door.” Mr. Harless winked at his son and took his wife’s arm. They led the way up the walk, bowing and curtseying many times along the way.

The entryway was a crush of people, and Lance was pressed up against his mother’s back. “Sorry, Mamma,” he yelled over the noise.

“Do you see him, Mr. Harless?” Lynn asked, standing on tiptoe. “Do you see Mr. Kirkpatrick?”

“Mamma, keep your voice down,” Joshua begged.

“This way.” Lynn pushed forward. It took a struggle through three different rooms before they could find space to stand.

“I feel sometimes these things are more trouble than they’re worth,” Howard announced.

“Oh, do be quiet, Howard,” Justin said. “Look, Nickolas, there…” He pointed over the head of a few people standing nearby.

“Mr. Harless!” A strange voice said. Lynn, Joshua and Lance turned as one. “So nice to see you again. And this is your lovely wife, I take it?”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick.” Mr. Harless bowed. “Yes, this is my wife, Lynn.”

“Madam.” Mr. Kirkpatrick bent over her hand, his dark eyes twinkling. “A pleasure.”

“So nice to make your acquaintance, sir, and welcome to the area,” Lynn simpered. Lance sighed and Joshua subtly elbowed him in the side.

“And may I introduce my sons?” Mr. Harless continued. “My eldest, Joshua, and next son, Lance. Howard stands here, and Justin and Nickolas are over there.”
“You are blessed indeed,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said, but his eyes never left Joshua’s face. “So nice to meet you all.”

Joshua blushed, but managed to say, “So, Mr. Kirkpatrick, how do you find Netherfield?”

“It is perfect in every way!” Mr. Kirkpatrick answered, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet. “And the only thing that makes it more perfect is knowing that I have such fine neighbors.” Joshua blushed again. Someone behind Mr. Kirkpatrick cleared his throat. “Oh, I’m sorry! Mr. and Mrs. Harless, Joshua, Lance…may I present my good friend, Mr. McLean?”

“An honor,” the man said, although it was obvious from his tone that he did not mean it. The man was handsome, with dark hair and dark eyes. He was slender, not tall, but the image he made in his dark suit made him seem larger than life. Everything about him contrasted with his friend, from the brooding look in his eyes to the black suit that seemed out of place next to Mr. Kirkpatrick’s suit of dark red.

“Might I ask you for the next dance, Joshua?” Mr. Kirkpatrick said.

“Oh, he would LOVE to dance with you, Mr. Kirkpatrick!” Lynn gushed before Joshua could reply. Joshua simply nodded, and Mr. Kirkpatrick melted off into the crowd with his friend close behind. “Oh, he simply adored you, Joshua!” Lynn almost shrieked with delight.

“Mamma, please,” Joshua begged.

“I see someone I must talk to,” Lynn said suddenly, and she headed across the room to a group of women. Lance knew she wanted nothing more than to brag about Joshua.

“He was affable,” Lance said, just to make Joshua blush.

“Yes,” Joshua admitted. “He had a friendly face.”

“Really? I couldn’t really see it…since he would not look away from you,” Lance teased.

“Stop,” Joshua said, but he could not stop smiling. “I did not think he would ask me for my first dance.”

“I did,” Lance told him. “You look wonderful tonight, and once he speaks with you, he will find out what a sweet person you are.”

“There is not much opportunity to speak while dancing,” Joshua reminded him.

“There will be at dinner, and I am sure he will wish to sit with you,” Lance said. “You dance so well…he will be completely charmed.”

“His friend was handsome,” Joshua said.

“Yes, though not at all as friendly as your Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Lance said. “He looked as if everything he saw displeased him.”

“He is a stranger in a strange setting,” Joshua protested. “I’m sure once he feels more at ease…”

“I doubt anything here would put him at ease,” Lance argued. “But here comes Mr. Kirkpatrick again. Enjoy your dance.”

“But…” Joshua began, then stopped as Mr. Kirkpatrick approached.
“May I?” He held out his arm and Joshua took it, giving one last glare in Lance’s direction.

Lance laughed as he watched his brother walk away. Joshua was a very good dancer, and Lance knew that Mr. Kirkpatrick would be back to ask for more dances. He wandered towards a refreshment table and nibbled at some snacks. Lance saw his mother in animated conversation with a few other ladies, and he could only imagine what she was saying about their new neighbor. Justin and Nickolas were giggling at the edge of the dance floor, flirting like mad with some of the young men they’d known since childhood, and Howard was brooding in a corner. Lance could not see his father.

Three dances came and went, and Joshua did not return. Lance knew that Mr. Kirkpatrick did not escort him more than once, as he saw the man dancing with other people. Lance noticed that Mr. Kirkpatrick’s friend, Mr. McLean, only danced with Mr. Kirkpatrick’s sisters, although there were many single men and women wanting for partners. Lance was standing by a plant, partially hidden from view, when Mr. Kirkpatrick hurried over to join his friend.

“Isn’t this a wonderful party?” Mr. Kirkpatrick mopped at his brow with his handkerchief. “Such a fine assembly of people. Friendly, attractive…”

“I feel you’ve found the only truly attractive person here,” Mr. McLean answered, motioning discreetly towards Joshua, who had joined his mother. Lance swelled with pride. “Otherwise, I feel I do more good standing and observing.”

“Come, McLean, you cannot tell me there is not a pretty figure or handsome face here good enough to lure you to the dance floor.” Mr. Kirkpatrick stood on tiptoe and observed the room. “What about one of Joshua’s brothers? Perhaps not the younger ones, they seem a bit…spirited…but how about Lance? He is not hard to look at.”

“He is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me,” Mr. McLean answered, and Lance was grateful for the shadow of the plant as his face grew red. “I need fresh air. Enjoy the curls and pretty blue eyes of your preferred partner, Kirkpatrick.” Mr. McLean pushed through the crowd and left the room.

“He said WHAT?” Lynn Harless gasped. Lance, Joshua and their parents stood in the parlor after arriving home from the dance. Howard and the younger boys had gone up to bed.

“Oh, Mamma, do not fret so,” Lance said. “I find it quite amusing, actually.”

“I’m glad to hear it, my boy,” Mr. Harless said. “It shows character.”

“That…that…MAN dares insult you like that?” Lynn continued. “His friend the epitome of charm and kindness. He barely allowed Joshua to leave his side the entire night! I hardly can believe he is bosom friends with such a man as this Mr. McLean. I declare he is the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world! So many without a partner, and he would only stand up with Mr. Kirkpatrick’s sisters!”

“Mamma, truly, I am not upset,” Lance said. “I am used to playing second fiddle to my prettier brother. And from such a person, really, it is not an insult.”

“Well, I am insulted on your behalf,” Lynn concluded. “You may not be as attractive as Joshua, but you have your qualities.”

“Thank you, Mamma,” Lance said, exchanging amused glances with his father.
“And you, my dear boy!” Lynn hugged Joshua. “Mr. Kirkpatrick was at your side as often as etiquette would allow! And he introduced his sisters to you! Such handsome women!”

“Yes, they were very kind,” Joshua said. “Please do not see more than what was there, Mamma. Mr. Kirkpatrick…”

“On this count I must agree with Mamma,” Lance interrupted. “Mr. Kirkpatrick was enthralled with you. When you’re on the dance floor, Joshua, it’s as if your feet don’t touch the floor. Add to that your charming personality…”

“Enough!” Mr. Harless interrupted. “I am fond of you, Joshua, but I do not wish to hear anything more of dances or feet or men who have let property nearby! I am off to bed.” He kissed his wife’s cheek and left the room.

“Now we must find a way for you to see them again,” Lynn began.

“I must agree with Papa. This is enough for one day,” Lance said. “Come, Joshua.”

They kissed their mother and went upstairs. Joshua waited until their bedroom door was closed before saying, “Tell me the truth, Lance. Were you hurt by the words of Mr. Kirkpatrick’s friend?”

“Not really,” Lance said, sighing as he fell onto the bed. “By his behavior tonight, he is not someone whose acquaintance I wish to pursue. He seemed completely unimpressed, and, truthfully, offended, by everything and everyone he saw tonight. Nothing could have pleased him, so I do not feel insulted.”

“No one wants to hear that they are not handsome, or are unattractive,” Joshua pointed out.

“Well, you will never hear such things in your lifetime, so don’t worry about me,” Lance said. “I will look upon this Mr. McLean only as the friend of the man who is very VERY interested in my brother.”

“He was attentive, was he not?” Joshua asked, blushing again. “He was completely agreeable in every way. He was very friendly and well-mannered, but underneath it was a completely witty sense of humor. I wish you could have spoken with him more. You would find him very interesting.”

“All I care about is that he found YOU very interesting, Joshua.” Lance gave his brother a quick hug. “We will be seeing more of this Mr. Kirkpatrick, mark my words.”

“Well…THAT evening could not end quickly enough.” The woman fell upon the lounge chair in a semi-dramatic pose. “I wonder that we could even get through it with our sanity.”

“Now, Molly, be fair. There was nothing ill to be said of the people we were with, the music, or the food.” Christopher Kirkpatrick poured himself a drink and glared at his sister. “It was a wonderful evening.”

“For you, perhaps, my friend. You had the most attractive person in the place giving you all of his attention. Present company excluded, of course.” Alexander McLean gave a slight bow in the direction of Christopher’s sisters, Molly and Kate.

“Joshua was completely adorable,” Kate declared. “I wanted to just take him and put him in my pocket.” Her husband rolled his eyes as he sat down on a chair by the fire. “What? Such a gentle soul.”
“I did admire him,” Molly agreed. “He is a nice man, and it is not his fault…”

“Not his fault what?” Christopher asked immediately.

“Not his fault that his family is so completely impossible,” Alexander finished, pouring himself a drink as well. “I did not have much reason to interact with the father, but the mother! I do not believe her mouth stopped moving the entire evening.”

“And the younger men! Such behavior.” Molly shook her head.

“You cannot find anything ill to say about Joshua’s next brother, Lance,” Christopher argued. “He is a friendly sort, and apparently very well-read. It is a shame he could not have had a better education.”

“Such a strange looking young man,” Kate said. “Let us all agree that Joshua is a charming young man, and leave it at that.”

“Strange looking indeed,” Alexander said, gazing into the fire thoughtfully.
THREE
“A note for Mr. Joshua,” the maid announced, handing him a neatly addressed envelope.

“Let me see that.” Lynn swiped it from the maid’s hand before Joshua could rise from his chair. “It is from Mr. Kirkpatrick’s sister, asking you to dinner tomorrow evening! Wonderful!”

“Is it?” Joshua said almost rudely. He tore the note from his mother’s grasp, then smiled at her. “Please, let me see.”

Lance smiled at the rare show of his brother’s temper. He knew Joshua was displeased with their mother; Mr. Kirkpatrick’s sisters had come to call on Joshua the week before, and Lynn had almost outdone herself with crass behavior and conversation. Howard had droned on about some sermons he’d recently read, Justin and Nickolas had left the room almost immediately after tea, and all in all, it had been a mortifying evening.

“I’m sure Mr. Kirkpatrick will make sure to have you seated by him at dinner, and then you may converse with him, and…” Lynn waved her hands in the air.

“Mamma, there will be but six of us at dinner,” Joshua reminded her. “Hardly the setting for intimate conversation.”

“I’m sure you will make the situation fit your needs, Joshua,” Lynn said, and Lance stared at her.

“Sometimes, Mamma, I feel you see Joshua as nothing more than a prized calf.”

“Whatever are you talking about?” Lynn asked. Before Lance could reply, Justin interrupted, “Joshua, please ask Mr. Kirkpatrick when he plans on giving a ball. With that beautiful house, it’s what he should do.”

“And invite everyone, including the officers,” Nickolas added, sending Justin into a fit of the giggles.

“May I take the carriage, Papa?” Joshua asked.

“Of course not! You will ride!” Lynn answered.

“Ride?” Joshua and Lance answered together.

“Yes, ride. It may rain, and then they will have to ask you to stay.”

“Mamma!” Joshua said, shocked.

“Papa,” Lance begged. “A voice of reason, please?”

“Sorry, my boy. Your mother will not rest until she has Joshua married off to this Kirkpatrick, and I have no interest in getting in her way.” Mr. Harless retired behind his newspaper, and Lance frowned.

“Well, Mamma, if Joshua gets sick and dies, you may have it on your conscience;” Lance said finally.

“If Joshua dies, Lance, YOU’LL be the one that needs to find a partner to save our family,” Nickolas
pointed out.

Mr. Harless put down his paper. “Joshua, you look in perfect health now. I’m sorry that your brothers are trying to kill you off.”

“I don’t mind, Papa,” Joshua said. “I know Lance is joking, although he’ll have the bedchamber all to himself if I’m gone.”

“Stop all this talk about death!” Lynn ordered. “Justin, my dear, did I see one of the regiment paying special attention to you in town?”

“Oh, that.” Justin waved a hand in the air, but could not keep the triumphant grin from his face. “His name is Denny. He’s a nice enough sort, though a bit slow.”

“Not as slow as the friend I was forced to deal with.” Nickolas grimaced. “I don’t understand WHY the officers pay attention to you before me. I’m older, and…”

“And uglier,” Justin interrupted, and Nickolas punched him in the arm. “Mamma!”

“Don’t fight,” Lynn said automatically.

“Boys, I would rather not retire to my study, but if you will continue to behave this way,” Mr. Harless threatened.

“I for one do not understand why you care so much about these officers,” Howard offered. “Not only are they uneducated buffoons, but they are a temporary diversion. You know they will not be here forever.”

“I am shocked to agree with Howard,” Lance said. “You do realize that they will eventually move on to a new town, full of new boys with blue eyes and golden hair?”

“Yes, but they will never forget me,” Justin said. “I’m sure of it.”

“You’ll MAKE sure of it,” Lance grumbled.

Joshua rode off to Netherfield the next afternoon, dressed in his finest suit. Even his mother could find no fault with him, and it was with a cheerful heart that Lance waved goodbye to his brother. That heart soon dropped, however, when it started to rain not ten minutes after Joshua’s departure.

“You should have given him the carriage, Mamma,” he said woefully, staring out the window into the steady rain.

“Indeed I should not! Now he must stay!”

“He will arrive soaking wet and miserable,” Lance said. “Not a very good impression.”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick will feel quite sorry for him, I am sure,” Lynn replied. “Nothing like a little pity to make the heart grow fonder.”

Lance snorted. “Perhaps, but I’m afraid that is the only friendliness Joshua will encounter in that house. I do not trust Mr. Kirkpatrick’s sisters, and as for his friend…”

“What do you mean? They were the picture of good manners!” Lynn gasped.
“Mamma, that was a false front if I ever saw one.” Lance went to the bookcase and took out a favorite novel. “You only see what you want to.”

“And you do not see anything of importance!” Lynn almost yelled. “All you see are your books and your newspapers.”

“If that is so, then I am not ashamed. I would rather be learned and alone than trotted out like a trophy to be won!” Lance snapped, and immediately regretted it. He did not think of Joshua as a trophy.

“Keep up this impertinence, Lance, and you WILL be alone!” Lynn replied.

Lance said nothing, but seethed with indignation. He gave his mother a curt nod and left the room.

When he arrived at Netherfield, Joshua was indeed soaking wet. He slid from the horse, wincing as his foot landed in a puddle. He was thankful for his light overcoat and hat, although they were wet as well. “Joshua!” Molly exclaimed as he was led into the parlor. “You’re soaked through!”

“I apologize for my appearance.” He bowed to Kate and Molly. “My father could not spare the carriage, and I’d hoped I could outride the rain.”

“You poor thing!” Kate gushed. “Come, take my seat by the fire.” She took him by the arm and led him to her chair. “Jenkins!” She snapped at the butler. “Fetch our guest a blanket.”

“Oh, please don’t go out of your way.” Joshua warmed his hands by the fire, grateful that the women were the only ones in the parlor. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Molly rubbed her hands over his slender arms. “We’ll have you warm in a moment. I’m sure you’ll feel quite toasty by dinner.”

“Thank you.” Joshua’s teeth chattered. The butler returned with a warm blanket, and Joshua peeled off his jacket. At the women’s urging, he also stepped out of his shoes and even his stockings. Jenkins whisked them all away to dry.

“How is everyone at home?” Molly asked, and Joshua could tell it was only out of politeness, not true caring.

“Fine, thank you. My mother sends her regards.”

“How kind.” Kate met her sister’s eye and quickly looked away. “Well, Joshua, we are very glad to have you this afternoon. Two women left alone together can only end in them not speaking to each other. You provide the perfect diversion.”

“I am happy to oblige,” Joshua said, trying to smile.

As the afternoon went on, he felt worse instead of better. He could not stop shivering, and although he tried to keep up with the conversation, his mind kept wandering. He was able to get his shoes, stockings and jacket on by dinner, and he tried to look alert and healthy when the men entered the parlor.

“Joshua…how wonderful to see you!” Mr. Kirkpatrick came over immediately to shake Joshua’s hand. “You remember my friend, Mr. McLean?”
“Mr. Kirkpatrick, thank you for having me.” Joshua smiled into Mr. Kirkpatrick’s brown eyes. “And yes, Mr. McLean…how good to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine, Joshua,” Mr. McLean said, but he looked at Joshua strangely.

“Joshua…are you all right?” Mr. Kirkpatrick’s face was a mask of concern as he started to lead Joshua to the dining room. “Your face is pale, but your cheeks…if I might say…they are quite red.”

“Oh, I’m fine. Perhaps I caught a bit of a chill on my way over,” Joshua said. He could hear his mother’s voice in the back of his head, and he tried to look charming. “My father had business, and could not spare the carriage. I’m not a very good horseman, and I’m afraid I got caught in the rain.”

“Permit me, please…” Mr. Kirkpatrick raised the back of his hand to Joshua’s face. “Good God, you’re burning up!”

“No, I’m sure it’s just because I stood too close to the fire.” Joshua was mortified.

“Molly, Kate, why did you not take better care of him?”

“They were kindness itself, sir, I promise you,” Joshua said. “Perhaps if I got something to eat…” The idea of food revolted Joshua at that moment, and he stumbled, grabbing at Mr. Kirkpatrick’s arm.

“If you allow me to say so, Joshua, I believe you should be in bed,” Mr. McLean said. “You look entirely unwell.”

“No, I couldn’t impose…”

“Jenkins!” Mr. Kirkpatrick yelled immediately, making Joshua jump.

“A message, sir, from Netherfield.” The maid held out the mail tray.

“For me?” Lance took the envelope. “This is Joshua’s writing. I hope he is all right.”

“I’m sure he’s fine. Perhaps he forgot something,” Nickolas said, waving his fork of sausage in the air.

“We heard from Miss Molly last night that Joshua was staying. No need to be alarmed,” Lynn pointed out.

“Yes, there IS need to be alarmed. Joshua is ill,” Lance told her. “I knew something like this would happen.”

“Do you blame me, my boy?” Mr. Harless actually looked ashamed.

Lance smiled. “No, Papa. If Joshua really had felt he was in danger of somehow becoming ill, he would not have agreed to ride to Netherfield.” Lance scanned the scribbled lines. “He has a sore throat and headache, and Mr. Kirkpatrick has called for the apothecary.”

“Sore throat and headache! A mere trifle!” Lynn exclaimed. “If he needed us, he would say so.”

“Still…” Lance tapped the card on the side of his plate. “I worry. I feel he would be better if one of us were there. Knowing Joshua, he is embarrassed to the extreme that he must impose on their kindness. I will go.”
“I am his mother. I…”

“No, Mamma,” Lance said quickly. “You have much to occupy you here. My hours are empty today. I will walk over after breakfast.”

“Walk! You’ll be a sight, traipsing through the mud!” Lynn said. “I will not allow it.”

“If I stay to the back farm road, Mamma, it will be fine. The sun has been shining all morning, and I’m sure it’s just as much dirt as mud,” Lance insisted. He quickly finished his breakfast and drained his cup in one gulp.

Lance packed a small bag with items for himself as well as Joshua and set out for the road. He had been mostly correct; half of the road was fairly dry, while the other half was still a brown wet mess. He carefully picked his way through the driest section of road, but his shoes were still covered in mud by the time Netherfield came into sight. Lance sighed as he rang the bell, looking down at himself in dismay. He then remembered he was not there to impress anyone in the house. He was there to care for his brother.

“May I help you?” The butler asked.

“Yes. Lance Harless. My brother Joshua is here?”

“Ah yes. Please come in. I will get the master.” The butler stepped aside and allowed Lance to come in.

Lance stomped his feet a bit outside the house before crossing the threshold. He hoped that anyone who saw him would keep their eyes on his face and not his shoes and pants, but he was fairly certain that would not happen. “Mr. Harless!”

“Lance, please, Mr. Kirkpatrick.” Lance held out his hand. “I hope you do not mind my intrusion. I got Joshua’s note and…”

“Of course you should come!” Mr. Kirkpatrick smiled. “Joshua should have someone here who can take care of him.”

“How is he?” Lance set down his bag.

“Jenkins, take this to Mr. Joshua’s room,” Mr. Kirkpatrick ordered. He flushed slightly. “I’ve not seen him myself, of course, since he’s taken to his bed, but I fear he has caught a bad cold.”

“I am sure he would wish to thank you for your hospitality,” Lance said. “The last thing Joshua wishes is to be a burden on someone.”

“He’s not a burden at all!” Mr. Kirkpatrick said immediately. “I just wish I could do more.”

“If you could show me to his room, I am sure that would be kindness enough,” Lance told him. “And with me there, you could perhaps poke your head in, say hello?”

“Yes, of course. Immediately.” Lance almost had to run to keep up as his host went jogging up the steps. “Anything you need, please ask.”

“Thank you.”

They stopped before a door and Mr. Kirkpatrick motioned for Lance to knock. “Enter,” a weak
voice said. Joshua’s face lit up when he saw his brother. “Lance! I did not mean for you to come, but I’m so glad to see you!” Joshua struggled to sit up.

“Sit back, relax,” Lance ordered. “Someone wishes to speak with you.” He moved the door open a bit wider.

“Joshua! I hope you’re feeling better.” Mr. Kirkpatrick blushed a bit and fidgeted in the doorway.

“Mr. Kirkpatrick! I assure you I am getting better by the minute,” Joshua said, though Lance knew he was lying. “I thank you so much for your hospitality. I’m so sorry that I must take advantage…”

“Forgive the interruption, Joshua, but it is no imposition at all,” Mr. Kirkpatrick promised. “Now that your brother is here, I hope that we will see you downstairs soon. I look forward to it.”

“As do I,” Joshua whispered. Mr. Kirkpatrick nodded and closed the door.

“Well.” Lance opened the curtains to allow sunlight into the dark room. “Mamma would be most proud. You have managed to wrap him around your little finger from your sickbed.”

“Lance,” Joshua scolded, then allowed his head to fall back against the pillow as a great cough went through his body.

“Rest,” Lance said. He came over and fluffed Joshua’s pillows a bit, getting him propped up so he could breathe better. “How are you feeling, truly?”

“Like I’ve been run over by Papa’s carriage, and the wheel has stopped right here.” Joshua put a hand on his chest. “This is so embarrassing, Lance. When can we leave?”

“We will do no such thing!” Lance exclaimed. “And NOT for the reasons Mamma would wish. The last thing you need is to be out in the weather, jolting about in the carriage. Netherfield has rooms to spare. Mr. Kirkpatrick will not even know we’re here.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Lance.” Joshua grabbed his brother’s hand.

“Mamma was going to come,” Lance began, and Joshua made a face. “But thankfully I talked her out of it.” Lance sighed and looked around the ornate bedroom. “Well, at least you are ill in a beautiful setting.”

“The house is gorgeous, although I did not see much of it,” Joshua admitted. “I know Mr. Kirkpatrick said eventually he would make some improvements.”

“I wish it was proper for him to come in and sit with you,” Lance said. “Although my presence would be wasted, for I believe he would allow no other nurse but himself.”

“Lance,” Joshua said again.

“If you could have seen his concern for you,” Lance said seriously. “Truly, Joshua. He cares deeply for you.”

“He barely knows me,” Joshua protested, but he could not keep the smile from his face.
FOUR
That evening, Lance took his dinner in Joshua’s room. He slept on a sofa near the bed, and stayed with his brother through breakfast and lunch the next day.

“I’m feeling much better!” Joshua insisted. “You MUST go down for dinner. There’s no reason to hermit yourself up here.”

“Except for the fact that the company is better,” Lance said. “I must admit that except for your Mr. Kirkpatrick, I have no interest in speaking with anyone down there.”

“He is not MY Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Joshua said.

“Not yet, perhaps,” Lance teased. He stood and put on his jacket. “Am I presentable?”

“You are always presentable,” Joshua said loyally. “You have no reason to be ashamed.”

“I will not be ashamed,” Lance promised. “Of anything in my family or person, my appearance is nothing I can truly be ashamed of.”

“Give everyone my best wishes,” Joshua said as Lance left the room.

“Lance!” Mr. Kirkpatrick said upon Lance’s arrival in the parlor. “How good to see you! And how is your brother?”

“I’m afraid he has not improved in health, Mr. Kirkpatrick, but in spirits he does well,” Lance told him. “I know he wishes to be well as soon as possible, so we no longer need to impose on your good nature.”

“As I told him yesterday, it is no imposition at all!” Mr. Kirkpatrick promised, and Lance believed him. “It is always the worst thing to have a cold. You are not very very ill, yet you are definitely not yourself.”

“Exactly.” Lance bowed to the others in the room. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Lance,” Molly said. Kate ignored him, and Mr. McLean strode purposefully from the room.

Mr. Kirkpatrick eyed the back of his best friend’s head, frowned, then said, “Let me lead you to the dining room.”

His host sat at the head of the table with Mr. McLean on his left and Lance on his right. They made small talk through the meal, with Mr. Kirkpatrick talking about how lovely the country was, how happy he was to have found a house in this particular neighborhood, and how welcoming everyone had been to him.

“Mr. McLean, how is your brother?” Molly asked suddenly. “I am dying to see him. It’s been forever.”

“Kristopher is fine, I thank you,” Mr. McLean said, his dark eyes showing their first sign of life that Lance had seen.
“You have a brother, Mr. McLean?” Lance asked politely.

“Just the one,” Mr. McLean answered. “He is eight years my junior.”

“And so accomplished!” Molly said. “He sings, plays instruments, writes poetry.”

“Very accomplished indeed,” Lance agreed.

“Let us have coffee,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said, rising. “It is much more comfortable in the study.” He led the way out of the room.

Kate, her husband, Molly and Mr. Kirkpatrick sat down at a table to play cards. Mr. McLean sat down with a book. “Do you play?” Mr. Hurst, Kate’s husband said gruffly.

“No, I’m afraid not,” Lance said. “Cards were not a popular pastime in our house as I grew up, so I’m afraid I am not a very good partner.”

“I see,” Mr. Hurst said, dismissing him completely.

“Mr. Kirkpatrick, would you mind if I looked through your books?” Lance asked, motioning to a shelf on the wall.

“Of course,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. “And if you wish me to bring more from the library, please let me know.”

Lance chose a volume and sat down by the fire. The spot he chose allowed him to truly study his host’s friend for the first time. Mr. McLean had dark curly hair which seemed to bring out the black of his eyes. He was slender, not tall, but his attitude gave him the image of someone very powerful and demanding. He did not look up from his book, and his body was entirely still. When Kate or Molly would shriek with joy or dismay at their game, however, he would occasionally look up and roll his eyes.

“Are you a great reader, Lance?” Molly asked finally. “You prefer it to all else, I see.”

“I am a great reader, yes,” Lance answered, “Although I do not prefer it to ALL else, just cards.”

“You mentioned no cardplaying in your home growing up…reading was encouraged, then?” Kate asked.

“Well, my mother does not set great store by reading or education, but my father does,” Lance said. “Joshua is well-read, and my younger brother, Howard, spends most of his time improving his mind.”

“I suppose your younger brothers do not show much interest,” Molly asked, and Kate hid a snicker.

“That is true,” Lance agreed. “But they are young, and find much more exciting things to pique their interest.”

“I think all young people should be encouraged to read,” Mr. Kirkpatrick announced.

“I agree,” Lance said. “Some of my happiest hours are spent in a book.”

“Kristopher is well-read, is he not, Mr. McLean?” Molly asked. “I believe every time I visit, his nose is buried in a book.”

“He reads on occasion, but it is not what occupies his time,” Mr. McLean said, putting his book
down. He had been trying to ignore the conversation, but had finally given up, his dark eyes studying Lance. “I agree with my friend. All young people should have exposure to books.”

“Well, living at Pemberly, Kristopher does not have a choice!” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. “The library is astounding.” His friend nodded his thanks.

“Well-educated, talented, creative…Kristopher is everything a young man should be!” Molly declared.

“I have encouraged that in him,” Mr. McLean said. He reluctantly turned to Lance. “My cousin and I are my brother’s guardians since our parents passed.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” Lance said quietly.

“So, if you are such a great reader, Lance, I assume that you must find our life here quite dull. Cards and gossip.” Molly tossed her head.

“Not at all,” Lance said. “I enjoy watching others play, and Joshua and I often play at checkers and other table games.”

“I see,” Molly said.

Lance went back to his book, face flaming. It seemed that nothing he could say would win these people to his side. He tried to tell himself he did not care. “It is not too late for YOU to start reading each day,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said to his sister.

“I find other ways to occupy my time,” Molly said. “I have no need to amuse myself in that way.”

“It is not just to amuse myself that I read, ma’am,” Lance said, closing his book sharply. “I read to learn what is going on in the world. I read so that I may discuss what is going on around me and sound knowledgeable.”

“We have offended you,” Molly said in mock surprise.

“No, it would take much for you to do that.” Lance replaced the book on the shelf. “Mr. Kirkpatrick, thank you for your kindness. I would return to my brother. Good evening to you all.” He left the room before anyone could say anything else to him.

“I see that Joshua is the only child in that family who has learned good manners,” Molly said, turning back to her card game.

“You goaded him,” Mr. McLean said suddenly, and Molly could only stare. “You would make him sound judgmental and condescending, simply because he did not wish to play cards. I find it admirable that he would admit his love of books and information.”

“Oh, so now you admire him,” Molly teased gently. “Mr. McLean, shall we announce the engagement?”

“Hardly. It would take more than a quick mind and intriguing eyes to align me with THAT family.” Mr. McLean turned back to his book without another word.

“Intriguing eyes?” Molly repeated, but he refused to look up. “Intriguing indeed.”

The next morning, Joshua was well enough to come down for breakfast, and Mr. Kirkpatrick could
not hide his pleasure. “I am sure it is the nursing of your brother that has helped you to improve,” he declared, helping Joshua into his chair.

“I did not do much but sit and read to him, Mr. Kirkpatrick, but I thank you for the compliment,” Lance said with a grin. He could endure the horrid company just to see Mr. Kirkpatrick smile at Joshua.

“Are you hungry?” Mr. Kirkpatrick said, motioning to the sideboard that was laden with food. “Let me fetch you something.”

“Just some fruit, please,” Joshua told him. “And tea will be fine.”

“We are glad to see you up and about,” Mr. McLean said politely.

“Thank you. I am sorry I could not be more social,” Joshua said shyly.

“Joshua! You are improved!” Molly cried as she entered the breakfast room. “You look well.”

“I am, thank you,” Joshua said.

“It was almost unbearable not to have you in our group,” Molly told him. “We all sat around, dull as tombs.”

Lance blinked at the lie, although he knew she was trying to be nice. “Joshua does improve any circle he joins.”

“Lance,” Joshua whispered bashfully.

“I’m sure you are eager to return home,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. “I will order the carriage as soon as we’ve finished here.”

“No, you can’t!” Joshua protested. “We will walk. It is a beautiful day…”

“I must disagree,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. “We do not want you sick in bed again. You will ride in the carriage. Lance, tell him.”

“I agree with our host, Joshua,” Lance said. “I prefer not to have to carry you most of the way.”

“It is settled!” Mr. Kirkpatrick set a plate of fruit in front of Joshua and took the seat next to him.

Lance tried not to seem too happy to leave Netherfield, but he felt as if a weight lifted from his shoulders as the carriage was brought round.

“I cannot thank you enough, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Joshua said, shaking hands. “I feel as if I owe you a great debt.”

“Your good health is the best payment I could ask for.” He held Joshua’s hand for an extra moment, then released it. “Lance, until we meet again.”

“I hope it is soon, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Lance said. “Oh, I have a message for you from my brothers.” His green eyes sparkled. “They order you to have a ball.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Mr. Kirkpatrick exclaimed. “As soon as Joshua is better, I will give one.”
“I will relay the message.” Lance bowed to Mr. McLean and Molly, who had accompanied them outside. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Mr. McLean said, bowing stiffly.

“Oh, do come visit when you’re healthy again!” Molly cried, hugging Joshua. “We shall miss you.”

“Thank you. Good-bye.” Joshua gave Mr. Kirkpatrick one last shy smile, then climbed into the carriage with Lance. “I cannot believe you said that about the ball!” Joshua hissed at Lance as the horses began to trot away.

“Anything to bring you two together again,” Lance said, smiling.

Mr. Harless was happy to see them arrive, as Lance had expected. Lance knew he hadn’t had an intelligent conversation in the house without Lance there. Lynn was less welcoming.

“You could have stayed a few more days,” she grumbled as she hugged Joshua. “I’m sure you didn’t put them out in any way.”

“Mamma, would you not wish Joshua to get better? He improves best at home, I’m sure,” Lance said.

“You hardly got any time with him!” Lynn moaned.

“He had time enough, Mamma, I assure you,” Lance said, winking at Joshua. “And I made sure to mention the idea of a ball. He seemed quite interested.”


“At Netherfield, and hopefully soon, my dear,” Lynn said.

“I cannot wait to tell you everything that has happened,” Justin said.

“I’ve only been gone a few days,” Joshua said.

“But you need to hear about the officers,” Justin said. “Nickolas thinks he’s found a partner.”

“I do not,” Nickolas said crossly.

“He was interested in me, but I had no time for him.” Justin waved a hand in the air. “He’s good enough for Nickolas, though.”

“If you do not be quiet, I will not be responsible for my actions,” Nickolas growled.

Joshua and Lance exchanged glances. “I feel I should go rest,” Joshua said.

“I will go with you.” They fled to their bedroom before the argument could escalate.

“You did not mean that, did you, Kirkpatrick?” Alexander McLean asked as they went back in the house.

“Mean what?” Christopher asked absently, his mind on the carriage that had just pulled away.

“A ball.” Alexander led the way towards the study.
“A ball? Who is having a ball?” Molly appeared from the breakfast room. “I do adore a ball, although I’m sure what passes for a ball around here is like nothing I’m used to.”

“Your brother, apparently,” Alexander replied. He led the way to the study and went to stare out the window.

“Really?” Molly asked in surprise.

“It was just an idea. Lance mentioned it and I said…”

“He said yes, once Joshua is better,” Alexander finished for him.

“Well, Christopher, of course this is your home, but…are you sure? A ball? For these people?” Molly wrinkled her nose. “I am sure Mr. McLean agrees with me.”

“I do, on this point,” Alexander said. “I do not know that I wish to spend more time with these people than is necessary.”

“I cannot believe you two. You sound horrible.” Christopher flopped into a chair. “They have been nothing but kind and generous to us.”

“As they should, as they are so far beneath us.” Molly frowned.

“Ridiculous,” Christopher scoffed. “I do not wish to discuss this further.”

“You will have to think about it,” Alexander said. “I realize you wish to make further acquaintance of Joshua, but I doubt this is the way to do it.”

“I said I do not wish to discuss it,” Christopher said, jumping to his feet and leaving the room.
FIVE

“Lance…Joshua…we are off to Meryton,” Justin announced a few days after the return from Netherfield. “The morning is fine and the officers are usually out and about at this time. Would you like to walk along?”

“I have things to do, thank you,” Joshua said.

“I suppose,” Lance said, putting down his book. “I could use some fresh air.”

“Wait until you see the officers, Lance,” Nickolas said, pulling him to his feet. “So handsome, and so attentive.”

“To ME,” Justin said.

“Because you make a spectacle of yourself, I’m sure,” Lance said.

“Maybe I DON’T want you to come along, if you’re going to act like that,” Justin said, pouting.

“Someone should make sure you two behave yourselves,” Lance said.

“I behave myself!” Nickolas exclaimed.

“On second thought, perhaps I should accompany you,” Joshua said, standing and stretching. “Lance shouldn’t have to watch over you alone.”

“We don’t need watching over,” Justin insisted, and Lance snorted.

“I’m shocked Papa lets you out of the house alone.”

“You’re such an old man,” Justin growled, flouncing out of the room.

“Yes, caring about the good name of one’s family does age a person,” Joshua said, amused. “I believe I see wrinkles at your eyes, Lance.”

“Sometimes I truly wish Papa and Mamma had stopped at three children,” Lance sighed, following Justin.

The walk was not what Lance would have called relaxing, with Justin and Nickolas chattering about officers the entire way. But it was a beautiful morning, and Lance did enjoy being outside. As they approached the center of the village, he could not help but notice the many red-coated men wandering through the square.

Justin and Nickolas were greeted often; apparently they had not been exaggerating their popularity. Lance got tired of smiling and shaking hands, and soon turned to look through the closest shop window. “Nickolas…who is THAT?” Justin grabbed Nickolas’ arm and discreetly pointed. “There. With Denny.”

“I don’t know. I’ve not see him before.” Nickolas peered through the crowd. “Handsome.”

“Don’t you think he’s handsome, Lance?” Justin asked.
“I suppose so,” Lance said mildly, although he saw immediately who Justin was talking about. The man was tall, with jet black hair and long legs. He carried himself like a gentleman, although he wore the uniform of the regiment.

“Let’s get Denny to introduce us!” Justin exclaimed, pulling Nickolas along with him.

“Justin!” Lance hissed, but there was no stopping his younger brother.

“Don’t commit fratricide in a public place,” Joshua begged.

“Justin…Nickolas…how good to see you!” Mr. Denny declared. “May I have the pleasure of presenting my friend, Adam Lambert? I’ve known him many years, and he has just joined the regiment.”

“How do you do?” Justin said, smiling at the new arrival.

“Adam, these are our friends, Justin and Nickolas Harless,” Mr. Denny said. “And, if I’m not mistaken, a few of their brothers?”

“Yes,” Justin said, remembering his manners. “My eldest brother, Joshua, and next brother, Lance.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Adam said with a smile.

“How do you find Meryton, Mr. Lambert?” Lance asked.

“It is still new to me, but I find that small towns such as this are most welcoming,” he replied. “And the natives are generous.” He looked at Nickolas, who giggled a bit.

“Do you dance, Mr. Lambert?” Justin asked.

“When the opportunity arises. I do enjoy dancing,” Adam said. “All musical activities, actually.”

“We should have Aunt give a dinner,” Nickolas suggested to Justin. “We could invite Mr. Denny, Mr. Lambert, Mister…”

“I’m sure the gentlemen have important duties to attend to, Justin,” Joshua reminded him gently.

“I believe we could make ourselves free for a dinner,” Mr. Denny said eagerly, obviously desperate to impress Justin.

“Look, Joshua, there is Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Nickolas said suddenly, elbowing his brother. “Shall we call him over?”

“You will do no such thing,” Lance snapped, but his admonishment was not necessary. Mr. Kirkpatrick and Mr. McLean were on horseback, and quickly recognized the Harless men in the crowd. Mr. Kirkpatrick dismounted and immediately hurried over.

“Joshua! You are looking much better!”

“Good morning, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Joshua said, blushing a bit. “I believe you know my brothers, Justin and Nickolas. And these are their friends, Mr. Denny, and Mr. Lambert, was it?”

“Yes,” Adam said, bowing to Mr. Kirkpatrick. Mr. Kirkpatrick and Joshua stepped a few feet away from the others and soon were in deep conversation.

Lance watched as Mr. McLean climbed down from his horse and regretfully approached. “Good
morning, Lance,” Mr. McLean said. “It is nice to see you again.” His dark eyes ran over Lance, then quickly darted away.

“Yes, you as well,” Lance said. He stared in surprise as Mr. McLean’s face darkened. He stared at Adam Lambert, his black eyes snapping. Adam simply looked at him, smirked a bit, and touched his hat in greeting. Mr. McLean gave him a stiff nod.

“Please give your brother my regards,” Mr. McLean said to Lance, then stalked back to his horse without another word.

Mr. Kirkpatrick pulled himself away from Joshua. “I suppose I must go,” he said regretfully. “Until we meet again.” He bowed to the party and followed his friend.

“Walk us to our aunt’s, Denny,” Justin commanded, and the man was only too happy to comply. Their aunt’s house was only a few blocks up, and the walk was quick. “It was nice to meet you,” Adam Lambert said to everyone, but his eyes fixed on Lance. “I hope we shall meet again soon.”

“Look for our aunt’s invitation,” Nickolas said, and Mr. Denny promised they would.

They spent a careless few hours with their aunt. Justin and Nickolas quickly informed her of everything they could think of involving the soldiers. Joshua stared out the window, obviously thinking of Mr. Kirkpatrick. Lance stared out the window as well, but he could not stop thinking of how Mr. McLean had acted towards Mr. Lambert.

On the walk back, Lance hung behind with Joshua. He told him everything he had witnessed, saying, “I just don’t understand. He looked at Mr. Lambert as if…as if he were something that had just crawled out from under a rock.”

“Mr. McLean does not seem like the type to be so rude,” Joshua said.

“Of course he is,” Lance retorted. “He is rude to everyone but you and Mr. Kirkpatrick. But to do so in public like that. I can only assume that there is some history between them.”

“Mr. Lambert is very attractive,” Joshua said. “And he seemed to think the same of you.”

“We hardly exchanged two words, Joshua,” Lance said, feeling his cheeks redden a bit.

“Not because he didn’t want to,” Joshua pointed out.

“How could you observe this, when you only had eyes for Mr. Kirkpatrick?”

“I observed plenty,” Joshua said, nudging him a bit.

The five brothers arrived for dinner at their aunt’s two evenings later. Their aunt had invited a small group of the soldiers, and their small room was soon full of laughter and talking. A small buffet was provided, and tables were set up for cards. Lance did not wish to play, as he knew he would prove himself very inept, so he sat nearby and took everything in. Justin and Nickolas sat at different tables, immediately holding court.

The tables quickly filled up, and Lance saw with some surprise that Mr. Lambert had not sat down to play. Instead, he came over to where Lance was sitting. “Do you mind if I sit with you?”

“So of course not.” Lance smiled warmly.
“Sometimes it is much more enjoyable to observe…especially if you have someone willing to hear your snide comments,” Mr. Lambert said. “I hope that you do not object.”

“I assure you that I was making similar snide comments of my own, although in my head,” Lance answered with a grin.

“Your brothers are very welcoming,” Mr. Lambert said.

“That is a polite way of putting it,” Lance said with a laugh. “I assure you that not all of us are so welcoming.”

“They make one feel at ease, that is certain,” Mr. Lambert said. “Although, if I am permitted to say so, I felt that way with you immediately as well.”

Lance looked into a pair of shocking blue eyes and blushed. “I try to put one at ease,” he said finally.

“I have heard much of an estate called Netherfield,” Mr. Lambert said to Lance’s surprise. “Is it far from here?”

“No by carriage or horseback,” Lance answered.

“How…how long have the present company been in residence?”

“No long,” Lance answered. “Though I’m sure, by the standards of some, they’ve been here far too long.” Mr. Lambert chuckled, a sound Lance enjoyed. He looked over and saw Justin staring at them with a frown on his face. Lance smiled and turned his full attention back to Mr. Lambert. “I understand that Mr. Kirkpatrick’s friend, Mr. McLean, has a large estate in Derbyshire.”

“Yes. Pemberly.” Mr. Lambert sighed. “I’m sure you noticed the way that Mr. McLean and I greeted one another. It is obvious that we’ve met before. I’ve known him my entire life.”

“Really?” Lance tried not to sound too surprised.

“Yes. I grew up as Mr. McLean’s playmate.” Mr. Lambert sighed again. “I don’t know much of Mr. Kirkpatrick, other than he is supposed to be a friendly sort of man. I only know Mr. McLean, and I cannot say the same for him. Are you much acquainted with him?”

“As much as I ever wish to be,” Lance replied. He unconsciously leaned in closer.

“I grew up at Pemberly, as I said,” Mr. Lambert continued. “My father was the steward there, and Mr. McLean, Alexander McLean’s father, was my godfather.” Lance blinked in surprise. “Alexander and I had many a lark over the years. I must admit that I was somewhat of a troublemaker, and Alexander was always by my side, eager to join in the fun. Let it suffice to say that there are many secrets kept between us.” A secretive smile crossed Mr. Lambert’s face. “At any rate, his father was the best of men, and always had a soft spot for me. He had in mind that the church would be my profession, and had a place set aside for me.”

Lance tried to picture those blue eyes and that smirk behind a pulpit, and failed entirely. “Yet here you are, with the regiment.”

“My position…my living…was given elsewhere.”

“Mr. McLean?” Lance gasped. “But why?”

“I cannot say. I did nothing that I can remember that would wrong him so, but there it is. All I can
say is that he and I are very different sorts of men.”

“Indeed,” Lance said. His brow furrowed.

“Come… I do not like to see you so concerned,” Mr. Lambert said. He touched Lance’s knee, and a thrill went through his body. “Let us speak of something else.”

Before they could start a new line of conversation, the others stood to switch tables, and their ability to speak freely was at an end.

Later that evening, when they were preparing for bed, Lance related everything from his conversation with Mr. Lambert. “I cannot believe it!” Joshua gasped, throwing his hairbrush down on the dressing table. “Mr. McLean is the picture of manners and good upbringing. I cannot believe that he would rob someone of their living!”

“Yet he apparently has,” Lance said from his spot on his bed.

Joshua picked up his hairbrush and began to run it through his curls, deep in thought. “I cannot imagine that Mr. Kirkpatrick would have such a friend, that Mr. McLean could deceive him in such a way. Yet… Mr. Lambert seemed like such a sincere, likeable man. I cannot believe he would tell such a lie.”

“Well, I for one believe Mr. Lambert.” Lance sat up. “The pain in his eyes when he spoke of Mr. McLean’s father… it was so honest.”

“Poor Mr. Kirkpatrick… to be so deceived by a good friend,” Joshua said mournfully.

“Mr. Kirkpatrick is a grown man, and will have to deal with the truth when it arises,” Lance said finally, climbing into bed. “I for one am glad that I have no reason to meet with Alexander McLean more than passing on the street.”

“Are you sure about this?” Molly asked as she and her brother climbed into their carriage.

“Completely sure, and eager to make the announcement.” Christopher Kirkpatrick helped his sister up into the carriage, then took his seat. “I think it will be a very enjoyable evening.”

“Couldn’t you enjoy yourself just as well at a small dinner party?” She asked.

“There is so much more opportunity for conversation.”

“The people of this area have been very kind to us, and I wish to pay them back. We have the house for it, we have a ballroom. We shall have a ball.”

“I agree with Mr. McLean in that…”

“Forgive my interruption, Molly, but I believe I am capable of making my own decisions,” Christopher growled. She blinked in surprise. “I do not need my younger sister or my younger friend to act as my conscience.”

“Of course,” Molly said, settling back on the seat.
“Perhaps if we transplant the roses, we should have room for the lilies,” Joshua said to Lance, pointing at a plot of earth under the window of the parlor. “When the windows are open, the roses shall smell heavenly.”

“Well, I for one don’t care what we plant WHERE,” Justin groaned from his seat on the ground. “I hate gardening.”

“No one is forcing you to be out here,” Lance snapped. He himself did not enjoy gardening, but Joshua needed help, and it was a beautiful day.


“I wonder…” Joshua paused, then looked at Lance. “How do I look?”

“Just wipe off your hands,” Lance said, and Joshua quickly began to brush the dirt from his hands and clothing.

“What are THEY doing here?” Justin asked.

“I have no idea,” Joshua said. They walked down to the drive to meet the carriage.

“Lance, Joshua, Justin!” Christopher Kirkpatrick bounced down from the carriage, then helped his sister out.

“Good afternoon, Lance, Justin, Joshua,” Molly said politely.

“May we invite you in?” Lance asked.

“Thank you,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. He and Joshua led the way inside. Mr. and Mrs. Harless were sitting in the parlor.

“Mamma, it is Mr. Kirkpatrick and Miss Molly,” Joshua announced.

“How do you do, Mr. Kirkpatrick! And Miss Molly, so good to see you.” Lynn rose to greet them, and Lance mentally begged her to contain herself. “To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“We have come to invite you all to a ball, next Tuesday,” Mr. Kirkpatrick announced.

“Wonderful!” Justin said, clapping his hands together.

“How kind of you, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Lance said. “Thank you.”

“I’m sure you’ll be well enough to attend?” Mr. Kirkpatrick asked Joshua.

“Of course he is!” Lynn said, beaming.

Molly ignored her. “Tuesday, then?” She stood and her brother could only follow suit.

“Yes, thank you so much,” Joshua said. “I will walk you out.” He hurriedly escorted the pair out the door before his mother could say anything else.

“Wait until Nickolas hears this!” Justin darted out the door.

“They will be impossible until Tuesday,” Lance said with a groan, falling back onto his chair.

“Well, hopefully this will keep the family distracted until Tuesday,” Mr. Harless said, handing Lance
a letter. “I received this in the post this morning.”

Lance scanned the letter. “Mr. Littrell…who is this, Papa?”

“Oh, that odious man!” Lynn wailed. “I hate the sound of his name!”

“What name?” Joshua asked upon his return to the room.

“Brian Littrell, my cousin,” Mr. Harless answered. “Your mother does not like him because his father and my father did not get along, and there has been a feud ever since.”

“He would take the inheritance that was rightfully yours!” Lynn said. Mr. Harless ignored her.

“Read the letter, Lance.”

“Dear Sir…the disagreement between our fathers has always caused me great uneasiness, but I felt it was not my place to interfere. Now that he has passed on, however, I have decided to take action. I received ordination this Easter, and am now under the patronage of Lord Louis Pearlman, the most kind and generous of benefactors. I feel, as a clergyman, it is my duty to calm the waters and encourage an example of peacemaking. If you will accept the offered olive-branch, I would wait on you and your family Saturday next. Lord Louis does not object to my being away for a fortnight. I look forward to seeing you, and remain your well-wisher and friend, Brian Littrell.”

“That’s the day after tomorrow,” Joshua said, leaning over Lance’s shoulder. “According to the date of the letter, at least.”

“See, Mrs. Harless? He is not all bad. It is not the fault of Brian Littrell OR myself that my father could not leave his estate in a way that would satisfy everyone. Mr. Littrell’s father and I argued about inheritance. That is all.”

“Well, if he must come, he must come,” Lynn sighed.

“It seems he has been fortunate in his situation, Papa,” Joshua said. “This Lord Louis sounds like he is settled well, and to have a living immediately upon receiving ordination…”

“Indeed, my boy.”

“What is happening?” Nickolas asked as he came in. “Justin mentioned something about a ball?”

“Many things are happening. There is to be a ball at Netherfield on Tuesday, and your father’s cousin, Mr. Littrell, arrives for a visit.”

“Oh,” Nickolas said. “What is his profession?”

“He is a clergyman,” Joshua answered.

“Oh,” Nickolas said again, dismissing the man immediately. “A ball, then?”

Lance rolled his eyes and handed the letter back to his father. “Britney is back from her trip, so I’m going to go over for a visit.”

“Give her father my regards,” Mr. Harless said.

“And make sure and tell her everything about Mr. Kirkpatrick, and how he dotes on Joshua!” Lynn said eagerly. “Her mother cannot help but find out.”
“Mamma,” Joshua said in disapproval.

“I will pass along YOUR message, Papa,” Lance said pointedly before leaving the room.

“Lance!” The young woman jumped to her feet. “How good to see you again! I was hoping you would stop by.”

“I have so much to tell you, I could not wait.” Lance hugged his friend. “How were your travels?”

“Enjoyable, but exhausting.” She took him by the hand and led him to the sofa. “Tell me everything.”

Lance smiled at his old friend. He’d known Britney Spears since they were children, and they’d always been good friends. Her father was a local government official, and their family had always been a bit more well-off than Lance’s. Britney never put on airs, and had a witty sense of humor that always amused Lance. She had blond hair and deep brown eyes, and caught the eye of any man around her. She was shy, though, and did not give many of them the time of day. “Well, Netherfield has been let, as you probably know.” She nodded. “Mr. Kirkpatrick is a very nice man…”

“…and he is very interested in Joshua,” she finished for him. “Word has already reached us. Reached Mamma, anyway. I’m so glad to hear it. Joshua deserves everything good in the world.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Lance said, grinning. “Mr. Kirkpatrick is the only good thing to arrive at Netherfield, though. I cannot wait for you to meet his sisters and his friend, Mr. McLean. A more obstinate, rude man you will never meet.”

“So you like him,” Britney teased.

Lance snorted. “Hardly. You, perhaps, will be enough to turn his head, but I assure you that my family certainly is not. You’re pretty and your father is a high-standing member of the community. That will be enough for them.”

“I’m not at all sorry I missed them, then,” she said. “I’m sure your Mamma…”

“Oh, do not allow me to start on Mamma,” Lance groaned. “She shoves Joshua at Mr. Kirkpatrick every chance she gets. And Justin and Nickolas…ever since the regiment has stopped at Meryton it is soldiers soldiers soldiers day and night. They have made complete fools of themselves, and in doing that, it reflects upon us all.”

“Lance, anyone who meets you OR Joshua knows immediately that you are nothing like those two,” Britney insisted. “Anyone of merit, that is.”

“You are slightly biased,” Lance said, but he smiled. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

“It sounds like I came home at just the right time,” Britney said. “Anything else?”

“Let’s see…our cousin, Brian Littrell, is to visit in a few days, and…oh! Mr. Kirkpatrick is giving a ball. I’m sure your family is invited.”

“I hope so,” Britney said with a grin. “I cannot wait to meet your new friend, Mr. McLean.”

“Stop it,” Lance growled, giving her a gentle shove.
Chapter 6

SIX

The visitor arrived punctually on Saturday, and everyone was assembled on the front walk to greet him. “Mr. Harless!” The man eagerly shook Mr. Harless’ hand. “I am so pleased to finally make your acquaintance. This enmity between our fathers is finally at an end with our friendship, I believe.”

“I agree,” Mr. Harless said, obviously amused. “My wife, Lynn.”

“Ma’am, it is an honor.” Mr. Littrell bent over her hand. “I thank you for your hospitality.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lynn said politely. She studied the man intently. He was not tall, had sandy hair that was thinning out, even at his young age, and bright blue eyes.

“What a lovely home you have,” Mr. Littrell said, looking up at the house. “A true treasure.” He looked at the five brothers, lined up behind their father. “And I’ve heard that you have been blessed with sons, and now I see the rumors are indeed true!”

“May I present my eldest, Joshua,” Lynn said, always pleased when someone complimented her family. “And there are Lance, Howard, Nickolas and Justin.”

“Delighted to meet you,” Mr. Littrell said.

“Come in, sir. You must be tired from your journey.” Lynn led the way into the house.

They settled in the parlor, where Lynn served tea. “A charming home,” Mr. Littrell murmured, taking the cup of tea she offered him. “Charming,” he repeated, looking at Joshua. Justin snickered and Lance discreetly kicked him.

“So, Mr. Littrell, we understand from your letter that you have recently been given a living?” Mr. Harless asked.

“Yes. I know not everyone is so fortunate, but the good Lord has smiled upon me,” Mr. Littrell said, dipping his head in what he obviously felt was a very humble gesture. Nickolas rolled his eyes and Joshua glared at him. “I have been given the rectory and the parish of Lord Louis Pearlman, and I could not have asked for a better situation in life. The only thing that could improve it is to find someone to share it with me.” Here he smiled at Joshua.

“Lord,” Justin said under his breath. Lance kicked him again, but silently agreed with him.

“Does he live near you, sir?” Lynn asked.

“A simple lane separates my garden from Rosings Park, his vast estate. If you could but see the gardens…the walkways…the flower beds…” Mr. Littrell sighed. “Truly impressive.”

“It sounds that way,” Lynn said.

“And I have been most graciously received by Lord Louis,” Mr. Littrell continued. “He has been kind enough to stop and say good morning if he is going by in his carriage and I am out in the garden. He has been most happy with the two sermons I’ve given so far, and has even given me notes on how I can improved. And…most importantly…I’ve been invited twice to dinner at Rosings
Park!

“Well, it sounds like you find yourself happily settled, Mr. Littrell. I am glad to hear it. Your father, my brother, may not have always been someone I agreed with, but it pleases me to see a member of the family doing so well,” Mr. Harless said.

“I thank you, sir, and I feel even more fortunate to have found myself surrounded by such beautiful relatives,” Mr. Littrell said, his blue eyes darting from cousin to cousin before stopping on Joshua.

“Allow me to show you to your room, sir,” Lynn said, standing.

“Gentlemen,” Mr. Littrell said, bowing to the room. They bowed as well, and he left with Lynn.

“What a bore!” Nickolas exclaimed. “Is that what happens when one takes orders? You become a dullard?”

“You’d know all about dullards, wouldn’t you, Nickolas?” Justin said, laughing.

“I’m sure he’s very educated and well-read,” Joshua said, although he looked doubtful.

“Educated and well-read does not always equal common sense, Joshua,” Mr. Harless said.

“He seemed…” Lance began.

“Pompous,” Justin finished. “I do not know how we shall stand him for a fortnight!”

“We must be polite,” Joshua told him. “He is family.”

“Family who has much interest in YOU,” Nickolas said, and Lance couldn’t hide his smile.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Joshua snapped.

As Lynn led Mr. Littrell up to his room, he kept a running commentary on how attractive everything was, how well-decorated and charming. He could only compliment it more by comparing it to Rosings Park, which he did frequently.

“Here you are,” Lynn said, opening the door. “This has a nice view of the fields.”

“I thank you,” Mr. Littrell said. “Mrs. Harless, I daresay I envy you. A beautiful home, and such a lovely family.” He placed his hat on a table and fidgeted a bit. “Especially your eldest?”

“Yes, Joshua is admired wherever he goes,” Lynn agreed proudly. “I cannot speak with complete certainty, but it is most likely that he will soon be engaged.”

“Ah, I see.” His disappointment was obvious.

“However, I know of no engagements regarding my YOUNGER sons,” she quickly added. “As far as I know, they are all unspoken for.”

“I see,” he said again, deep in thought.

“Please feel free to rest, sir. We will send for you at teatime.” Lynn smiled and closed the door.
By the time the day of the ball came around, everyone in the household was eagerly looking forward to it...for entirely different reasons. Lynn, Justin, Nickolas and even Joshua were looking forward to the delights the ball held. Lance, Mr. Harless and Howard were looking forward to it as a diversion from Mr. Littrell’s constant ramblings and empty compliments. Howard had hoped that the clergyman would be someone he could discuss things with, such as the importance of saving one’s soul, but the visitor always seemed to change the subject to something else, at least if anyone else was in the room. Lance found that he was far too often the subject of Mr. Littrell’s attention, and it made him uncomfortable.

“Are you sure, Mr. Littrell, that Lord Louis would not frown upon you attending something as frivolous as a ball?” Mr. Harless asked as they waited downstairs for Lynn and Justin to finish getting ready.

“I appreciate your kind concern, sir, but I do believe he would understand. Not only is it given by someone you say is a great gentleman, but I attend with my family. Who could possibly think anything ill would occur?” Mr. Littrell smiled at Lance. “I do hope that my cousins will favor me with a dance.”

Nickolas and Justin burst into giggles. “Ah, here she is,” Mr. Harless said as Lynn came down the stairs. “Are you ready finally?”

“I am,” Lynn said.

Mr. and Mrs. Harless, Justin and Nickolas went in the first carriage, with the others following. “I do so look forward to this evening,” Mr. Littrell said. “As someone of such humble means, it is not often I get to partake of such pleasures.”

“I am glad, sir,” Lance said. “I hope you find our small gathering tolerable, after the society you experience at Rosings Park.”

“Oh, I am sure everything will be most satisfactory!” Mr. Littrell said, beaming.

As soon as they arrived at Netherfield, Lance left Mr. Littrell to the care of his parents and went hurrying along to find Britney. “Lance!” She called from the side of the main hall.

“I'm so glad to see you,” Lance said, kissing both her cheeks. “I need your help to escape my cousin.”

“Why?” Britney asked.

“I fear he has become a bit too attentive,” Lance said, trying to hide behind her.

“You do not like him?”

“What's not to like? He is friendly, full of compliments, learned...and he enjoys talking. OFTEN,” Lance stressed.

“You do not sound impressed,” Britney said.

“Forgive me, but I do not enjoy the company of someone who enjoys the sound of his own voice more than anything else,” Lance said.

“Cousin Lance!” A voice said from behind him, and Lance winced. “I thought I'd lost you in the crowd. I do hope you'll save a dance for me.”
“Of course,” Lance said faintly. Britney was able to keep a straight face, but her brown eyes were dancing with amusement. “Mr. Littrell, may I introduce my good friend, Miss Britney Spears? Her father works in our local government.”

“Miss Spears, a pleasure.” Mr. Littrell said, bowing over her hand. “Any friend of Lance’s is a friend of mine, of course.”

“So nice to meet you,” Britney said.

“I believe that…” Mr. Littrell’s eyes widened as he looked across the room. “Is that…can that be Alexander McLean?”

“Why, yes,” Lance said in surprise. “Do you know him?”

“Yes, I do! He is the nephew of Lord Louis!” Mr. Littrell exclaimed. “I should go introduce myself.”

“Oh, I don’t think you should,” Lance said, but his voice held no conviction.

“If you’ll excuse me.” Mr. Littrell bowed and hurried off.

“He seems very nice,” Britney said.

“Hmmmm,” Lance said. He stood on tiptoe and tried to see through the crowd.

“Who are you looking for?”

“No one,” Lance said vaguely. There were a lot of red coats in the crowd, but none of them belonged to Adam Lambert. Lance sighed and straightened his jacket. He’d worn this favorite green suit because he knew it brought out his eyes.

“Lance!” Justin came hurrying through the crowd, towing Mr. Denny behind him. “I just asked Denny where your Mr. Lambert was.”

“He’s not MY Mr. Lambert,” Lance snapped, but smiled at Mr. Denny. “How do you do, Mr. Denny. My friend, Miss Spears.”

“Ma’am,” Mr. Denny said, bowing. He leaned in to Lance. “If you’re looking for Adam, I regret that he had business that took him out of town. He left yesterday, and is not expected back until tomorrow.”

“Oh. I see.”

“If I may say so, Lance, I believe his true reason for disappearing was to avoid encountering a certain gentleman.”

Justin tugged at his arm. “Come on, Denny!”

“Good evening.” Mr. Denny bowed again and allowed Justin to drag him away.

“Who is this Mr. Lambert?” Britney demanded immediately. “And who doesn’t he want to see?”

“Well,” Lance began, then froze as someone approached him.

“Lance.”

Lance’s eyes widened. “Mr. McLean. Good evening.”
“Good evening.” Alexander McLean looked handsome yet uncomfortable in his wine-colored suit.

“May I present my friend, Miss Spears?”

“A pleasure, Miss Spears.” Mr. McLean bowed. Lance waited for him to ask her to dance. She was high enough in town society to warrant an invitation from someone as prejudiced as Mr. McLean. “Lance, I was wondering if you would give me the pleasure of a dance.”

Lance blinked in astonishment. “Well, I… I can promise you the Boulangere, when it is time.”

“Thank you. I will return for you then.” He bowed and walked away.

“My word!” Britney gaped at him. “You have left out much. You did not say how attractive he was.”

“I did not realize it,” Lance said. He was shaken by the invitation, and even more by his own acceptance. “He is who Adam Lambert wished to avoid.”

“You have time before the first dance,” Britney said firmly. “Explain yourself.”

Lance gave her a brief overview of everything that had transpired regarding Mr. Lambert and Mr. McLean. “I cannot believe I accepted his invitation.”

“I hate to say it, Lance, but remember that one Mr. McLean is worth five Mr. Lamberts,” Britney said, and Lance stared at her. “Who is this Mr. Lambert? You know nothing of him except what he’s told you. It is obvious that Mr. McLean is a gentleman of some worth.”

“He may be worth a king’s fortune, but a common kitchen maid has more personality,” Lance replied. “It takes more than a full purse to interest me, Britney. Oh, here he comes.”

“Lance, shall we?” Mr. McLean motioned to the dance floor.

“Yes, thank you.” Lance shot one more look of desperation at Britney, then walked to the dance floor. They began the movements of the dance, neither one speaking. Mr. McLean continued to study Lance, as if he’d never seen him before. Finally, Lance could bare the silence no longer.

“This is an enjoyable gathering.”

“Yes,” Mr. McLean said simply. After a few more turns, he said, “Do you and your family walk to Meryton often?”

“We do,” Lance said. “My brothers enjoy the society there, and it often breaks the monotony of the day.” He paused, then added, “When you saw us there the other day, we had just begun forming a new acquaintance.”

Mr. McLean frowned, his dark eyes turning black. He didn’t respond, and Lance thought he might have angered him more than could be controlled in a public place. Finally Mr. McLean said, “Mr. Lambert makes friends with ease…but it is to be seen if he can keep these friends.”

“He has not kept you as a friend, apparently…and this is something that will dearly affect his future,” Lance said.

“Hmm,” Mr. McLean said in agreement. Now it was Lance’s turn to study Mr. McLean. “What are you thinking?” Mr. McLean said suddenly.

“I am trying to figure you out, sir,” Lance replied. “I hear such different accounts of you, and then to
add in what I myself have observed…it puzzles me.”

“I would think someone with your intelligence would enjoy a puzzle,” Mr. McLean said seriously. “But as you see me now is not how I truly am. You must admit that we all wear a different mask in public.”

“But if I do not figure you out now, I may not get another chance,” Lance answered.

“I do not wish to disappoint you,” Mr. McLean said, but the dance ended and they moved apart. He snapped a quick bow and hurried off into the crowd. Lance watched him head for Joshua and Mr. Kirkpatrick, and frowned.

“I must know all,” Britney said, appearing at his elbow. “What did you speak of?”

“Nothing of substance,” Lance told her, wondering why he cared.
Chapter 7

SEVEN

After breakfast the next morning, Lynn, Lance, Howard and Nickolas were seated in the parlor. Howard and Lance were reading, and Lynn was mending a shirt of Nickolas’.

“Mamma, it is my most becoming shirt,” Nickolas said earnestly. “This color brings out my eyes, and even Justin is envious of it. You MUST fix it.”

“I promise it will look as good as new,” Lynn assured him. “I need only take a tuck in there, and fold this over, and…”

“Mrs. Harless.” Mr. Littrell stepped into the room, his face as red as fire. “Might I speak with Lance for a moment?”

Lynn stared at him, then jumped up. “Of course, Mr. Littrell! He is doing nothing of importance.” She smiled broadly. “I, however, have an important chore awaiting me in the kitchen. Howard! Nickolas! Attend me there.” Lynn yanked Nickolas out of his chair. “NOW.”

“Of course, Mamma.” Howard marked his place with a sigh. He mournfully looked at Lance, then left the room after his mother and brother.

“Wait,” Lance said faintly, for once desperately wishing for his brother’s company. He smiled weakly at his father’s cousin. “Pray, sit down, Mr. Littrell.”

“Thank you, Lance.” Mr. Littrell sat down. “I believe you know me well enough now to call me by my Christian name, Brian.”

“All right, Brian.” Lance looked everywhere but at him.

“I believe you know why I wish to speak with you,” Brian began.

“Trust when I say I do not,” Lance lied.

“I told the truth when I said that I came to visit your family in order to make amends for the deeds of my father against your father,” Brian said. “It was a ridiculous argument, and blame is shared on both sides.”

“I am glad to have the family at peace.”

“The other reason, however, is a bit more…personal,” Brian said, smiling. “As you have seen, I have been quite fortunate in my life so far. I have a wonderful living, a beautiful home, and the support of one of the finest men in the land.”

“Congratulations,” Lance murmured, but Brian ignored him.

“I often look at myself and feel I’ve earned it. I have worked hard, put my faith in God, and good things have come to me.” Brian looked upward with a gaze of reverence, and Lance felt ill. “However, it is my duty as a clergyman to set a good example for the members of my parish, and therefore, I feel it is due time for me to find a life-mate.”

“I see.”
“I have spoken at length with Lord Louis regarding this topic, and he agrees. There are many fine prospects in the parish, and I feel, humbly, of course, that I could not in any way be considered a poor match.” Brian smiled at Lance, obviously waiting for confirmation. Lance only nodded. “Lord Louis has made it perfectly clear that he does not object to my selection of a partner rather than a wife, and I myself do not seem to have preference one way or the other.” The blue eyes focused on Lance. “Almost immediately upon my arrival here, you caught my eye. You are not unattractive, and you have a quick and keen mind. I feel you could only improve my situation, and you would fare well as a clergyman’s partner.”

“Oh.” Lance swallowed hard. “Mr. Littrell…”

“Brian, I said,” Brian said. “I realize this may come as a bit of a surprise to you, as you were not expecting a proposal from a stranger. I do feel, however, that you must have felt my admiration. I can give you a life of leisure, with clothing and resources as you have always known. I can also bring you into the circle of Lord Louis Pearman, which any person could only dream of.”

“Brian…Mr. Littrell.” Lance jumped to his feet. “I must interrupt you.”

“Yes, Lance?” Brian stood as well, taking Lance’s hand in both of his own. “You have my complete attention.”

Lance smiled and withdrew his hand. “First of all, let me say that I am very humbly honored by your proposal. Please accept my thanks, for I feel the compliment quite keenly. However…it is impossible for me to do anything but decline.”

“You do yourself credit!” Brian exclaimed, and Lance stared at him. “I know it is quite the proper thing for you to do…reject a proposal the first time it is offered. I think all the better of you for it. It shows good upbringing, proper manners…”

“I thank you again, but I assure you that is not the reason for my words!” Lance interrupted. “They are true…not a simpering attempt to act the coquette. I am perfectly serious. You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the LAST person in the world who could make YOU happy. I am sure that if Lord Louis ever met me, he would find me lacking in every important manner.”

“I must disagree,” Brian said, but he was no longer smiling. “I could fill an entire letter with your admirable traits.”

“I hope that one of my best traits is my honesty,” Lance said softly. “Mr. Littrell, I cannot marry you. We are not a good match in any sense of the word. Please know that I mean only to save you from hurt, not cause it.” Lance put a hand on Brian’s arm. “I cannot speak plainer. I do not intend to mislead you, but speak the truth from my very heart.”

“I will speak to your parents,” Brian said decidedly. “You will see what is being offered to you, and realize it is in your best interest.” He bowed deeply and left the room without another word.

When Mr. Littrell left the room, he almost immediately ran into Lynn, who had hovered in the hallway trying to eavesdrop. “Mr. Littrell! Is everything all right?”

“May I speak honestly with you, ma’am?”

“Oh course! Come into this room here.” Lynn led the way into her small sewing room. “Please speak freely.”
“I have asked your son for his hand,” Mr. Littrell said, and Lynn beamed. “He refused.” Lynn’s face fell. “I can only assume that it is due to some joke of his, that he wishes to appear modest. I know that most…”

“Let me assure, you, sir, that I will speak to Lance directly. He is a headstrong, foolish boy, and he does not know what is best for his own happiness. I will MAKE him see.”

“Wait,” Mr. Littrell said uneasily. “If Lance is such a headstrong gentleman, I don’t know if he is the right match for me. I want to be happy, and if there will be continued struggle…”

“No no no!” Lynn said shrilly, patting him on the arm. “You…you misunderstand! In every other way, Lance is as good-natured a person as you could ever meet! He lives to keep the peace. I will go to my husband, we will converse, and then we will speak with Lance.” She hurried away before Mr. Littrell could say more.

Lynn rushed into Mr. Harless’ study without knocking. “To what do I owe this great pleasure?” He asked with a sigh.

“Mr. Harless, you MUST speak with Lance.” She began to pace. “Sometimes I feel you are the only person he listens to.”

“Perhaps because I speak sense to him,” Mr. Harless said. “What is going on?”

“We are ALL in an uproar!” Lynn exclaimed. “Lance will not have Mr. Littrell, and if you do not MAKE him accept him, Mr. Littrell will not have Lance!”

Mr. Harless sighed again and closed his book. “I do not understand. Explain.”

“Mr. Littrell has proposed, and what do you think your son has done? REFUSED! If you do not speak to him, I do not know WHAT will happen!”

“I am not sure what I am to do to remedy this situation, but call Lance in. We shall speak to him.” Mr. Harless stood and leaned against his desk.

Lynn rang the bell and gave the order for Lance to be summoned to the study. While they waited, she continued to pace. Lance knocked, then entered the room. He frowned as he saw his mother pacing. “You called for me, Papa?”

“Yes, son. Please come in, and close the door. Your younger brothers have inherited your mother’s penchant for listening at keyholes.”

“I do no such thing!” Lynn snapped, and Mr. Harless smiled at his son.

“I call you here on a very important matter, as, apparently, your entire future is at stake.” Mr. Harless’ face was serious, but his eyes twinkled as he studied his favorite son. “Mr. Littrell has asked for your hand?”

“Yes, Papa,” Lance said, sighing. “He has.”

“And?”

“And I refused him.”

“For what I reason I am sure I know not!” Lynn could not contain herself. “An attractive young man, well-settled in life. I am sure there are no Mr. Kirkpatricks waiting out there for YOU, Lance, so
what right do you have to refuse Mr. Littrell!"

“Please, ma’am,” Mr. Harless said, holding up his hand. Lynn snapped her mouth shut but continued to pace, occasionally waving her handkerchief in the air. “Let us summarize the situation. Mr. Littrell has made you an offer. You have refused it.” Lance nodded. “Your mother insists upon your accepting it. Correct, Mrs. Harless?”

“YES,” Lynn answered vehemently. “And if he does NOT accept it, I will NEVER see him again.”

“Well, well.” Mr. Harless stood and put a hand on his son’s shoulders. “You are at an unhappy crossroads, Lance. From this day, you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do NOT marry Mr. Littrell…and I will never see you again if you DO.”

A broad grin crossed Lance’s face. “I understand, Papa. May I be excused?”

“Of course.”

As Lance darted out of the study, he heard his mother start to shriek. “What do you MEAN by this, Mr. Harless?”

Lance hid himself in his room, speaking only with Joshua. Lynn came to the room three times that day, each time shrieking at Lance to come to his senses. With each visit, Lance became more and more resolved. Lynn attempted to include Joshua in the drama, but he politely stayed back and offered no opinion.

Brian Littrell kept to himself as well, unable to believe that anyone would find a good reason to refuse him. He finally came down to the parlor, where he sat with Howard and discussed religious texts. As the afternoon went on, however, he became more and more dejected, and a bit embarrassed. When Lance did not return to gratefully accept his offer, he started to become angry.

Someone rang at the door, and the maid could find no one to announce the guest to. She finally found Justin in the kitchen, and brought him to the foyer. “Britney!” Justin ran up and grabbed her hands. “I am glad you’ve come, for there is SUCH excitement. What do you think of this? Mr. Littrell has made an offer to Lance, and he refuses!”

“Keep your voice down, Justin,” Britney said, removing her cloak and handing it to the maid. “Where is everyone?”

“Mamma has been up with Lance for ages, trying to convince him. Everyone else is…well, I don’t know or care. Mr. Littrell is here, with Howard.” Justin opened the door.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Littrell,” Britney said, curtseying.

Mr. Littrell stood, but had a hard time smiling back. “Miss Spears. How good to see you.”

“LANCE!” Justin yelled, running out of the room. “Britney is here!”

Britney winced. “I understand you will be leaving soon to return home?”

“Not soon enough,” Mr. Littrell muttered, and she made a sympathetic face.

“Lance, I tell you, if you continue to act in such a way, you will die alone!” They heard Lynn yell. “I am done with you from this point forward. I will not speak to you again!”
“One can only hope,” Lance said to himself. He went to the parlor and opened the door. “Oh, Mr. Littrell. I…”

“I have heard enough,” Mr. Littrell said. “Please do not continue.” He turned to Britney and tried to smile. “May I ask after your family, Miss Spears?”

“They are fine, thank you.” Britney gave Lance a look of bewilderment, then took a seat by the window. Lance sat next to her on the sofa, and Mr. Harless sat nearby, but he acted as if Lance did not exist. Britney stayed for tea, and Mr. Littrell paid her the utmost attention.

When Britney finally stood to leave, Lance walked her to the door. “I came to invite you all for dinner on Friday,” Britney said. “That is, if you feel it is appropriate now.”

“I feel anything to keep us all from actually having to speak to one another is QUITE appropriate,” Lance said. “Thank you, Britney.”

“Of course.” Britney bit her bottom lip. “Are you sure this was the right decision, Lance?”

“I cannot marry someone I do not love, and that I cannot respect,” Lance said. Britney nodded and went on her way.

The next morning, Justin, Nickolas and Lance walked to Meryton. Normally Lance would not have sought the company of his younger brothers, but he figured SOMEONE should mind them, and he did not want to stay in the same house with Mr. Littrell more than was necessary. One would think that after a rejection such as his, Mr. Littrell would be on the way home immediately. Unfortunately, he seemed bound and determined to keep his schedule.

“Look, Lance, there’s Mr. Lambert!” Nickolas grabbed Lance’s arm and pointed.

“Is it physically impossible for you to show any sort of decorum?” Lance growled while pasting a smile on his face. Mr. Lambert approached them immediately.

“Lance, Nickolas, Justin…so good to see you all again.” Mr. Lambert tipped his hat to them. “Denny is around here somewhere, with a few of the others…”

“I’ll fetch them, and we’ll go to Aunt’s for tea,” Justin decided.

“I will come with you!” As usual, Nickolas followed in his brother’s footsteps.

“Shall we start?” Mr. Lambert asked, and Lance nodded.

“We missed you at the Netherfield ball,” Lance said. “It was a grand occasion.”

“So I’ve heard. I hear your brothers never wanted for partners.” A smirk crossed Mr. Lambert’s face and Lance could only laugh.

“You heard correctly.”

“And also, from what I hear, you did not spend much time along the wall.”

Lance blushed. “I did enjoy dancing, that is true.”

“You are too smart for me to attempt to fool you, Lance. I’m sure you know that I did not have business so important that I should miss the ball. My absence WAS self-imposed.”
Lance looked up into the blue eyes. “I did assume that,” he admitted.

“I did want to come, I wanted to see…” Mr. Lambert looked Lance over from head to toe. “…Netherfield,” he finished. “…But I realized as the time drew near that I had better not come. To be forced to socialize with Mr. McLean, to share the same space with him…it might be more than I could bear. And the last thing I wanted to do was cause any sort of scene that would ruin the event. It is not Mr. Kirkpatrick’s fault that his friend is such a man.”

“I agree completely, and I feel you made the right choice.”

“We shall have our dance another time,” Mr. Lambert promised, and Lance blushed again.

Lance burst through the door of the house, eager to share his visit with Joshua. Mr. Lambert had sat only with him throughout tea, and even Justin’s best attempts could not divert his attention. Lance hurried to the parlor, figuring the family would be taking tea there. He found Howard and his mother. “Where is Joshua?”

His mother ignored him. “I believe he is upstairs,” Howard answered.

“Thank you.” Lance took the steps two at a time. He opened their bedroom door, almost falling into the room in his haste. “Joshua! I…” Lance took one look at his brother and stopped short. “Whatever is wrong?”

Joshua, face pale, held out a piece of expensive stationery. “This is from Molly Kirkpatrick.”

“Oh?” Lance sat down next to Joshua on the bed.

“I will explain its contents, but to quickly summarize…the whole party has left Netherfield and are on their way to town. They do not intend to return.”

“What?” Lance gasped.

“Let me see…” Joshua scanned the letter quickly. “Here.” He drew a ragged breath. “I do not pretend to regret anything I should leave in the neighborhood, except your society, my friend. I do hope that we may lessen the pain of separation through a very frequent correspondence.”

“Well,” Lance said after a moment’s pause. “It is unlucky that you were not able to bid a proper farewell to them, but it sounds like she wishes to maintain your friendship. You do not know that they will NEVER return.”

“Yes, I do,” Joshua contradicted. “She continues, “When my brother left us yesterday, he imagined that the business he has in London will be conducted in just a few days, but we do not believe it so. I am sure that once we are in town, Christopher will be in no hurry to leave again, and I know I will wish to stay for some time. I have many friends in town, and I wish you were one of them. However, I feel that you will be able to amuse yourself with the kind men in your own town.””

“Oh, Joshua,” Lance said sadly, all earlier joy forgotten. He knew that Molly was pointing out that Joshua could find a new beau in the area, and that he should forget her brother.

“Wait,” Joshua said. “You do not know all. This…this is the passage that particularly pains me. “Mr. McLean is impatient to see his brother, and to confess the truth, we are also eager to see him. I do not think Kristopher McLean has an equal in sweetness and accomplishment. Not only are Kate and I quite enamored of him, but we hope soon to have him as our brother as well. Our brother has a great
deal of admiration for Kristopher and now he will see him as often as his heart desires. And I must admit, the idea of Kristopher and Christopher is quite diverting.”

“Kristopher McLean?” Lance exclaimed.

“You can see that I am not the one that Molly hopes to become related to,” Joshua said dully. “She means well, I believe…she knows of my feelings towards her brother and wishes to let me down gently.”

“That is NOT the point of this letter at ALL,” Lance said almost angrily, jumping to his feet.

“It’s not?”

“No. Miss Molly sees that her brother is in love with YOU, but SHE wants him to marry Kristopher McLean. She follows her brother to town with the idea of not only pushing them together, but forcing her brother to forget about YOU.”

“I don’t…”

“Believe me, Joshua. Any human being with an iota of intelligence who has seen you and Mr. Kirkpatrick together cannot doubt his affection for you.”

“I cannot believe that she would be so deceitful,” Joshua said.

“Oh, I can,” Lance said almost savagely. He looked at Joshua, whose blue eyes were full of tears. “But let us argue no more.” He sat back down. “I have all sorts of interesting things to tell you, but we must agree on one thing. Mamma needs only know that the party has left Netherfield. She needs to know nothing else.”

“Agreed.” Joshua laid his head on Lance’s shoulder.
Chapter 8

EIGHT

“It is so good to see you all again!” Mr. Spears beamed at his guests. “Britney has been yearning for you all to visit, after our long trip.”

“Thank you for having us,” Lynn said. “May I present my husband’s cousin, Mr. Littrell?”

“I give my most sincere thanks at being allowed to join the party.” Mr. Littrell said. “A clergyman such as myself does not often get included in such things, and I assure you that it is the joy of my day.”

“Er, thank you,” Mr. Spears said, not sure what to say.

“Mrs. Spears, I take it? A pleasure,” Mr. Littrell said, bowing over Mrs. Spears’ hand.

“Mr. Littrell, so good to see you again,” Britney said, stepping forward and curtseying.

“You are a vision, Miss Spears, if I may say so,” Mr. Littrell gushed, and she blushed prettily.

“Come, everyone,” Mr. Spears said, leading the way to the dining room.

Lance expected to sit next to Britney, as he always did. He was surprised when she placed herself at her mother’s left, and put Mr. Littrell at her own left. Mr. Littrell outdid himself with what he obviously saw as charming compliments and conversation, and Lance had a hard time keeping his food down. He watched Britney take it all in, making few comments and keeping a friendly smile on her face throughout the meal.

Lance winced as he heard his mother go on and on to Mrs. Spears about Mr. Kirkpatrick and his obvious interest in Joshua. Joshua was seated on Lance’s right, and Lance gave him a sympathetic smile. “You realize she is incapable of restraining herself,” Lance murmured.

“If she kept quiet, I would assume she was ill,” Joshua murmured back, and Lance choked a laugh in his napkin.

The evening seemed an eternity to both Lance and Joshua, although Mr. Littrell and Lynn both looked satisfied as they climbed into the carriages. This time, Lance rode with his mother, father and Justin. “That was a nice evening, was it not?” Lynn said, arranging her skirts.

“No,” Justin pouted. “Lord, I thought it would never end.”

“I agree,” Lance and his father said together.

“I do not understand you.” Lynn addressed her husband. “The food was good, the conversation…”

“Was tolerable,” he interrupted. “Between you and my cousin, no one else could get a word in.”

“I do not know what you speak of.” Lynn sat back and stared out the window.

“I do hope that our lives will soon return to normal,” Mr. Harless stated. “Between Netherfield, Mr. Littrell, and the regiment, I feel I do not know my own family.”

“I’m sure things will settle soon, Papa,” Lance said, wishing for peace and quiet himself.
Their wish seemed to be granted the next morning, for when Lance came down for breakfast, Mr. Littrell was nowhere to be found. “Not that I wish for his company, but where is he?” Lance quietly asked Joshua as he sat down.

“I do not know. He was gone when I came down,” Joshua answered.

They finished breakfast and went out to work in the gardens. They had been at their work for over an hour before they spotted Mr. Littrell striding down the lane. “Good morning, cousins!” Mr. Littrell called. “Such a lovely beginning to the day, don’t you think?”

“Yes…yes, it is,” Lance said in astonishment. Mr. Littrell had not addressed him except when necessary since the rejected proposal.

“You do such beautiful work here,” Mr. Littrell said, walking up and down by the flowerbeds. “I hope to soon have such beautiful gardens at my home.”

“It is hard work, but the result is quite worth it,” Joshua said. “Do you have much of a green thumb, Mr. Littrell?”

“I am no expert, but I believe I can coax things from the soil,” Mr. Littrell said. “But then again, it is always easier when someone has help.” He chuckled, then blushed. “Excuse me, cousins. I must start to pack my things for my return home tomorrow.”

Lance and Joshua stared after him. “What was THAT all about?” Lance asked.

“I have no idea.” Joshua shook his head.

“Well, I guess this is it, then.” Mr. Littrell watched the coachman load the last of his bags onto the carriage. “Again, I thank you so much for your warm hospitality.”

“Happy to have you,” Mr. Harless said briefly, bowing.

“Ma’am, it was a pleasure. Thank you for allowing me to stay in your beautiful home.” Mr. Littrell bowed over Lynn’s hand.

“You are always welcome, Mr. Littrell. I hope your stay was an enjoyable one.” Lynn glared at Lance.

“Oh, I assure you, it was everything I could have hoped for,” he said earnestly. “Joshua, Lance, Howard, Nickolas, Justin…until we meet again, which will, I believe, be quite soon.”

“Why?” Nickolas asked, and Joshua nudged him.

“Farewell.” Mr. Littrell climbed into the carriage.

They watched the carriage drive away. “Papa, have you invited him back for another stay?” Justin asked.

“No,” Mr. Harless answered, and went back into the house.

“There goes your one chance at happiness, Lance,” Lynn moaned. “First Mr. Kirkpatrick goes away, now Mr. Littrell. I could not possibly be more depressed.”
“Yes, Mamma, because this is all about you,” Lance said. She glared at him and flounced back into the house.

After the midday meal, Joshua continued to work in the garden while Justin, Lance and Nickolas sat nearby. “I do not see how you can enjoy getting your hands so dirty,” Nickolas said, staring at his own lily-white palms.

“I enjoy the results,” Joshua said simply. “There are no flowers without the hard work to plant them.”

“When I get married, I will be rich enough to have someone ELSE plant the flowers,” Justin said dreamily, staring at the sky. “I will have a house FULL of servants.”

“I’d like to see this wealthy suitor of yours,” Lance said in amusement. “You do realize that a soldier does not earn a fortune.”

“I know,” Justin muttered. “I never said I was marrying a soldier.”

“Look! Here is Britney!” Nickolas said in surprise, standing up.

“What a pleasant surprise!” Lance jumped to his feet and kissed his friend’s cheek. “I did not know you would call today.”

“Well, I needed to speak to you, and did not want the news to arrive faster than I could.” Britney blushed.

“News? Is everything all right?” Joshua removed his gardening gloves and came to stand at her side.

“Everything is fine,” Britney said. “I have come to tell you of my engagement.”

“Engagement?” Joshua gasped.

“Yes. I am engaged to wed Mr. Littrell.”

“Engaged to Mr. Littrell?” Lance weakly sat down on the closest chair. “My dear Britney… impossible!”

“MAMMA!” Justin and Nickolas went running to the house.

“You feel that because you did not accept him, no one else could?” Britney frowned.

“No, of course not,” Lance said. “I…I am just shocked. It is very sudden.”

“Yes, it is,” Britney agreed. “But as he was to leave today, things needed to be settled quickly.”

“Of course we wish you both all the happiness in the world,” Joshua said. “We want only what is best for you.” Britney nodded her thanks.

“You seem so…incompatible,” Lance said.

“He is a good man at heart,” Britney said. “He has a good living, and a nice home. He is settled. My father is a government official. He cannot provide well for my sister and I.”

“But…” Lance stammered.
“I realize it is an odd situation, with Mr. Littrell asking for your hand just the other day,” Britney said, softening a bit. “I am not a romantic, as you know. I never was. I ask only for a comfortable home. I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is just as good as anyone else upon marrying.”

“Of course,” Lance said faintly.

“I must return home. As you can imagine, my mother has many things she wishes to discuss with me.” Britney kissed Lance. “You are still my friend?”

“Of course!” Lance exclaimed. Britney hugged Joshua and went on her way. They stared after her.

“Mr. Littrell to marry BRITNEY SPEARS!” They heard their mother shriek.

“Britney…to marry Brian Littrell,” Lance said mournfully. “I still cannot believe it.”

“We must,” Joshua said with a sigh. He touched Lance’s shoulder, then went back to his gardening.

Mr. Harless did not receive his wish, as Mr. Littrell, the regiment, and Lynn’s constant discussion of Mr. Kirkpatrick continued to delegate life in their home. Lance winced every time his mother mentioned Mr. Kirkpatrick, as he saw the look of pain cross his brother’s face. He sometimes wished it was permissible to tell one’s mother to shut her mouth and keep it so.

Justin and Nickolas were in Meryton as often as permitted, and Justin was quite obviously a favorite of both the soldiers and some of the wives. Nickolas followed sadly in his shadow, happy for whatever attention he could receive. Lance couldn’t understand why some of the men preferred Justin’s company and not Nickolas; Nickolas would actually listen when someone spoke, and was not unattractive, with his golden blond hair, bright blue eyes and crooked grin. He would not be dissuaded from the visits to Meryton, however, and Lance soon gave up trying.

Mr. Littrell returned within a fortnight, but they fortunately had little interaction with him. He left early to spend the day at the Spears’, and often returned right before the family was off to bed, apologizing for his absence. No one truly missed him. The wedding to Britney was a quiet, private affair, and before they knew it, Mr. Littrell was off to introduce his new wife to the members of his parish and, of course, Lord Louis.

Joshua continued to correspond with Molly Kirkpatrick, even though Lance knew it pained him. He filled his letters with cheerful description of life in their county, and asked about life in town, even though he feared any mention of Kristopher McLean. The third letter received from London erased any doubt in the minds of Lance or Joshua. Molly professed great affection for Joshua, stating she missed him dearly. The rest of the letter, unfortunately, centered around Kristopher, how much they all loved spending time with him, and often Mr. Kirkpatrick spent time at the McLean’s London house.

This sent Joshua into a deep depression, and Lance took great pains not to mention anyone in the Netherfield party. Lynn, however, could not keep from discussing it. “Does Miss Kirkpatrick say when they will return to Netherfield?”

“Obviously not, Mamma,” Lance said before Joshua could reply. “Joshua would have said so.”

“It was obvious that they enjoyed themselves at the ball…one would think they had found enough here to encourage their return.”
“Mamma,” Lance said with a sigh. Joshua got up and left the room.

Lynn was finally distracted from the topic of Mr. Kirkpatrick the next week, when her brother and his wife arrived for a visit. James and Diane Bass were a favorite aunt and uncle of both Joshua and Lance. James was so sensible and intelligent that Lance sometimes wondered if he were secretly HIS child, and that Mr. and Mrs. Harless had adopted him at birth.

Mrs. Bass handed out gifts, which easily distracted Justin and Nickolas. She pulled Lance aside and asked him about Joshua. “He looks so pale, so thin. And he cannot afford to be any thinner!”

“I know, Aunt,” Lance said with a sigh. “I’m sure our mother will tell all soon enough, but let me just say that Joshua has been thwarted in love.”

“By whom?”

“By the man’s sisters and friend,” Lance said. “I cannot prove it, but I am fairly certain that they each have their reasons to dissuade Mr. Kirkpatrick from further pursuing Joshua.”

“I am sorry to hear it. He is such a dear boy.” Mrs. Bass looked at Joshua fondly. “I almost wish it was you, not he, for I believe you could have handled it better.”

“I would give anything to take this burden from his heart,” Lance said with a sigh. “I am simply grateful that they are removed from the area, so he does not need to be in constant contact with them. They are in London.”

“Well, I was going to ask…do you think it would help him to come back to town with us? I believe a change of scene would do him good. We are far removed from where they stay, I am sure, and it is a large town. Our chances of meeting up with them are quite slim.”

“Aunt, I think that is a wonderful idea!” Lance exclaimed. “I will miss Joshua dreadfully, but I most certainly put his well-being before my own.”

“It is settled, then,” Mrs. Bass said decidedly.

The next evening, everyone went to Meryton to dine with Mr. Bass and Lynn’s sister. Justin made sure that a few of the soldiers were invited, and it was a happy gathering.

Lance introduced Mr. Lambert to her aunt, who seemed mildly impressed. She was more impressed when she found out that Mr. Lambert had grown up at Pemberly. “I know the area well!” Mrs. Bass exclaimed. “In my girlhood, I spent many happy years there!”

“I can agree with you, ma’am, that it is a most beautiful spot,” Mr. Lambert agreed. “I unfortunately do not return there often, but have many happy memories.”

Mr. Lambert excused himself, taking Lance along with him. They sat on a small settee in the corner. “I understand the party from Netherfield have gone away to London?”

“Yes,” Lance said, sighing as he watched Joshua try to enjoy himself with Nickolas and a few soldiers. “From what we’ve gathered through correspondence with Miss Kirkpatrick, they do not mean to return.”
“I’m sorry to hear it, for your brother’s sake,” Mr. Lambert said. “He seems like a kind man, and I do not wish his feelings hurt.”

“I thank you,” Lance said, liking Mr. Lambert more by the minute.

“I do not know you well, Lance, but I’m sure you can see what I do…I am fairly certain that Mr. Kirkpatrick was encouraged to leave.”

“I do agree,” Lance said in surprise. “I know Miss Kirkpatrick and Mr. McLean had no love for the area or its inhabitants.”

“Mr. McLean has always been very proud,” Mr. Lambert said. “I’m sure he felt that your brother was not good enough for his friend. Please do not think that I belittle your brother in any way.”

“I know you do not,” Lance said with a smile. “And if Mr. McLean would behave this way, I am glad that Joshua has no contact with Mr. Kirkpatrick or anyone else.”

“I, of course, cannot give much insight into the situation. My feelings regarding Mr. McLean you well know,” Mr. Lambert said with a grin.

“Yes, I feel you are quite likely very prejudiced,” Lance said with a laugh. “Miss Kirkpatrick mentions Mr. McLean’s brother quite often.”

“Ah, yes, Kristopher.” Mr. Lambert frowned. “I knew him when he was young, and I do not have much to say of him. A nice enough boy, I presume.”

“According to Miss Kirkpatrick, he is quite accomplished. A singer and poet.”

“I suppose,” Mr. Lambert said vaguely. “It is been a very long time since I’ve been in his presence.” He looked at Lance and smiled. “I am sure there are many more accomplished young men in the country.”

Lance blushed and studied his hands. “If you speak of me, I am in no way accomplished.”

“I beg to differ,” Mr. Lambert said quietly.

“Mr. Lambert!” Justin called, saving Lance from the necessity of a reply. “My brother monopolizes your time. Come sit with us.”

“Duty calls.” Mr. Lambert stood and bowed, his eyes never leaving Lance’s face.

On the way home, Mrs. Bass fell into step with Lance. “Please walk with me,” she said, linking her arm through his.

“Of course, Aunt.” Lance allowed her to pull him back a bit.

“I wish to speak with you regarding Mr. Lambert.”

“Mr. Lambert?” Lance felt a pink blur rush across his cheeks.

“Yes. You seem…very interested in him.”

“He is an interesting man.” Lance patted his aunt’s hand.
“Do not joke with me, Lance,” she said sternly. “I must know…how serious is it between you?”

“My goodness, Aunt…you are the one who is behaving in a serious manner,” Lance teased. He sobered. “I can assure you, Aunt, that I am by no means in love with Adam Lambert. I enjoy his company, and find him quite agreeable. While it seems that he speaks with me often, I dare not assume I am the only object of his attentions.” Lance shrugged and smiled. “We enjoy each other, and that is all I can say for the moment.”

“All right,” Mrs. Bass said, heaving a sigh of relief. “While I cannot ever judge someone for their background – although he is simply a steward’s son – I feel we do not know enough about him for me to rest easy in the thought that someday he would choose you as his partner.”

“Aunt!” Lance blushed. “My own thoughts have not strayed so far!”

“Well, now I can return to London with a clear conscience. You know I only speak in such a way because of my affection for you.”

“I do know that, Aunt, and I appreciate it.” Lance patted her hand again.
Chapter 9

NINE

My dearest friend Lance,

I apologize that I have not written to you sooner, but I have only just had time to sit down and take a few deep breaths. As you can imagine, it has been a whirlwind of activity since my arrival here. My husband has described the neighborhood, the house, and Rosings Park in great detail, but it was not enough to satisfy him. He took me by the hand and led me throughout the place as soon as the door was open.

There is nothing that I cannot praise in my new home. Each room is just the right size, and designed to take advantage of the morning or afternoon sun. Mr. Littrell takes great pride in his gardens, and often spends hours outside tending them. I do what I can to assist, but as you know, horticulture is not my forte. The rooms are furnished in a comfortable manner, and I can only say that I will never be ashamed to entertain guests here. The village is small, but everyone is friendly, and the roads are as good as can be expected.

I am sure you are eager to hear of Lord Louis Pearlman. As you’ve heard my husband explain, he is a man of some power and influence in the area, and one does not forget it while in his presence. He welcomed me in a friendly manner, and has many ideas as to how one can improve oneself and one’s home.

I do not have more time to write currently, but I hope to hear from you soon. In a short while, my father and sister Jamie are planning a visit. It is my most precious hope that you will join their party.

Yours affectionately, Britney

Brother Lance,

I would make this letter longer than my first, as I wrote only to inform you of our safe arrival in town. We have been here a week, and I have not seen or heard from Molly Kirkpatrick. My last letter from home announced our date of arrival…perhaps it was lost in the post. Our aunt goes tomorrow into that part of town, and I shall take the opportunity to travel with her and call in Grosvenor Street.

Brother Lance,

I waited to send this letter until after my visit to the Kirkpatrick town home. I saw Miss Kirkpatrick. She seemed a bit off in spirit, but was happy to see me, and scolded me of not informing her of my visit. I was correct; she did not receive my letter. I inquired after her brother, of course, and was told that they did not often see him. He is out much with Mr. McLean. On the very day of my visit, they expected Kristopher McLean for dinner. As you can imagine, I very much wished to see him, but I needed to go, as the others were preparing to go out. She promised to return my visit as soon as was possible.

Our aunt calls me, so I must go. Please take care and write often.

Your brother, Joshua
Lance,

We have been in town for a month now, and I cannot deceive myself any longer. I have sat at home for almost a fortnight, waiting for Miss Kirkpatrick to call. She finally arrived today, but it was quite obvious she returned my visit only because decorum required it. She stayed so short a time she barely touched her chair. She was a completely different person from the woman I met at Netherfield. She behaved as if I were a mere acquaintance, and not a dear friend she vowed to keep in contact with for a lifetime. I know you enjoy hearing you are right, brother, so I will say it now. She wishes to keep me from her brother, and discontinues this false friendship to make it so. I do not know what I have done to make her dislike me so, but it is something I must accept. She did let slip that her brother is aware of my presence in town, but I am sure that she has done everything in her power to keep us from meeting.

As you can imagine, I have been in quite a dark mood since her visit, and my poor aunt and uncle have done everything in their power to improve my disposition. I do my best to banish every thought of him, and I admit that letters from you will do much toward that end. Let me hear from you soon.

I enjoyed your tale of Britney’s letters. I feel you should indeed accompany Mr. Spears and Jamie when they visit, if only to see things for yourself.

I remain your loving brother, Joshua.

Dearest Aunt,

I thank you for your most recent letter. While Joshua has no problems divulging his deepest emotions to me, it often is better to hear things from another source. I feel for him deeply, and wish I could be there to give him a shoulder to cry on. I am very relieved that YOU are there, for you are the best substitute for me that I can think of.

I also write you to relieve you of some worries you expressed before returning to London. Mr. Lambert no longer actively seeks my attention. He has been diverted elsewhere by a fortune of ten thousand pounds. You read that correctly. His name is Mr. King, and Mr. Lambert has made himself quite available to him whenever necessary. I am not surprised; when one does not have a living or a family to inherit from, one does what one must. I was hurt at first, that I will admit. However, I must not have been in love, for I can speak of him without malice, and greet him with genuine kindness when we come upon one another. No one was harmed, and I wish him the best. As a matter of fact, we had a nice conversation not two nights ago, where he gave me a very amusing description of Lord Louis Pearlman, and gave warning as to what I might expect if I go for the intended visit with Mr. Spears and Jamie.

Justin and Nickolas seem to feel Mr. Lambert’s loss more than I, but then again, they are barely more than children. They seem to be ignorant of the fact that it is not only a young woman that must find some way to support herself in the future.

Give Uncle and Joshua my love, and I write with the utmost affection.

Your nephew, Lance

My dear Joshua,

I cannot believe how the weeks have flown by. I have just finished packing for my trip, and as I sit
and look at my trunk, it amazes me how quickly the visit has come upon us. I must admit, when Britney invited me, I did not take the invitation seriously, but as the time has passed, I realize how much I miss her. Even Mr. Littrell has become tolerable in my mind. Of course, one of the main reasons I look forward to this trip is the stop in London to see YOU, brother. As you can imagine, home gets quite dull without you, and there are times I must remove myself from the room to keep from boxing Justin’s ears. I need your calming presence to keep me sane!

I do feel badly about leaving our father, as I know he will miss me. I cannot imagine him here with the others, without you or I to comfort him. But he is an adult, and he will bear it as best he can.

As far as my traveling companions, I know that I will not be subject to a great deal of intelligent conversation. However, Mr. Spears and Jamie are as kind a pair as one could find, and I am sure we will get along amiably.

I look forward to greeting you…the time is almost upon us!

With fondest affection, Lance

“Look!” Jamie pointed up. “Look, Lance…Joshua is waiting for you!”

“That he is,” Lance said with a smile. He could barely wait for the carriage to pull to a stop before he hopped out and stretched. The drive had not been too long – only twenty-four miles – but at times it felt like twenty-four days.

“Lance!” Joshua threw the door open and hurried out into Lance’s welcoming embrace. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I’ve missed you.” Lance pulled back and studied his brother. He had expected to find Joshua pale and thin. Joshua was thin, as always, but his face had a healthy pink glow. Lance was relieved.

“Mr. Spears, Jamie, how nice to see you!” Joshua said. “Come in and refresh yourselves.”

They met Lance’s aunt and uncle inside the house, and soon settled in for some lemonade and sweets in the small parlor. Lance made sure Joshua was deep in conversation with Jamie before he took a seat beside his aunt. She smiled at him. “You wish to know everything Joshua has not told you.”

“Please,” Lance begged.

“Well, I cannot know everything, as he has not said much. But one does not need words. After Miss Kirkpatrick’s visit, Joshua withdrew to his room for hours. He did that for a few days, and then I believe he ran out of excuses to remain there. He struggles to keep his spirits up, at least in front of us. He finds much to keep him busy, but when he does not think you are looking…” Mrs. Bass shrugged. “He seems better every day, and I think he may soon be over him.”

“I hope I do not meet with Miss Kirkpatrick,” Lance said almost savagely. “I do not think I will be able to hold my tongue.”

“If you’ve held it with Mr. Lambert, I daresay you will always be able to hold it,” Mrs. Bass said. “I was shocked by his fickle turn.”

“I do not mind it, Aunt, I promise you,” Lance vowed. “I am not enough for him, and I understand that.”
“Well, I have something that might give you a bit of freedom,” Mrs. Bass said. “In a few months, your uncle and I plan to take a small pleasure trip to the Lakes…and we would like you to accompany us.”

“You would?” Lance asked in surprise. “Surely Joshua…”

“Joshua is a dear boy, and we have so enjoyed having him with us here,” Mrs. Bass said. “But it is your turn, Lance. Joshua may stay home and take care of your mother.”

“It is Papa who needs him more,” Lance said, laughing. “This gives me new energy. Farewell to disappointment. I believe we shall have a wonderful time.”

“It is settled, then.” Mrs. Bass stood. “Let me show you to your rooms.”

The few days’ visit in London seemed to fly by for Lance. He always enjoyed Joshua’s company, as well as that of his aunt, but he was eager to visit Britney and view her new life for himself.

“Give her my love,” Joshua said. “I know I do not need to tell you this, but please take notice of EVERYTHING. In DETAIL. And then write to me.”

“I promise,” Lance said, laughing. “I’m so thankful to see you smile, Joshua. I worry for you.”

“I’m fine, I promise,” Joshua said. “I am not made of glass, you know.”

“I know.” Lance gave his brother one last hug and then bade farewell to his aunt and uncle.

“I do so hate traveling,” Jamie said as they were settled in the carriage. “It it so monotonous.”

“That all depends on what country you are traveling through,” Mr. Spears told her. “It is true, the area through which we are to ride is not very exciting. From what I hear, Lance will get to experience a trip through some very beautiful country.”

“Yes. I quite look forward to it,” Lance said, sighing. “It will not come soon enough, I am sure.”

Lance settled back in the seat and sighed. It was going to be a long trip, but he consoled himself with dreams of his upcoming journey.

They reached the Parsonage between afternoon tea and dinnertime. “Look!” Jamie leaned out the window and pointed. “How charming!”

As they came up the lane, Lance saw Britney and Mr. Littrell come hurrying out of the house to great them. “Oh, my dear Mr. Spears! Sister Jamie! Cousin Lance!” Mr. Littrell waved his hat. “Welcome!”

Lance allowed Mr. Spears and Jamie to greet Britney, then he hugged her. “It is so good to see you!”

“And you!” Britney squeezed him tight. “I have been waiting all day for you to arrive.”

“And here we are,” Lance said. He bowed to her husband. “Mr. Littrell, thank you for having me.”

“Of course! We were so glad to hear you were joining us,” Mr. Littrell said, and he sounded sincere. “Come in, all of you!” He led them to the parlor. “Before we do anything else, I must ask after your family, cousin. How are your parents and your brothers?”

“Mamma and Papa are well, thank you, and send their regards. We just visited with Joshua in
London, and he is doing well,” Lance replied.

“I hope we return you to them with nothing but a glowing report of our life here,” Mr. Littrell said. He smiled at Britney. “I think you will see how well your friend fares.”

“We do have a happy life here,” Britney said. “I have a small meal prepared. I know that at times, traveling can steal one’s appetite.”

“A small meal? She works wonders in the kitchen,” Mr. Littrell said fondly. “Come to the dining room.”

“This is an attractive place,” Mr. Spears commented, and that was all it took for Mr. Littrell to start speaking of the home and all the improvements he’d made and was planning on making.

“Lord Louis has been quite attentive to us in this manner,” Britney was finally able to say. “He’s had many ideas on how we can improve things.”

“Ah, yes, Lord Louis!” Mr. Littrell could barely finish his food before continuing. “You will have the pleasure of meeting him at Sunday services. And I know for a fact that any time we are to be welcomed at Rosings Park, you are all included in the invitation.”

“How thoughtful,” Lance replied, remembering everything Mr. Lambert had told him about Lord Pearlman.

After dinner, Mr. Littrell insisted on taking them out and showing them the gardens. He walked ahead with Jamie and Mr. Spears. Britney linked her arm through Lance’s. “He quite enjoys gardening. It is good for the soul, and good for the body. I quite encourage him to spend as much time outside as possible.”

“I’m sure you do,” Lance said with a smile. “I know when we left each other, it was not exactly under the best of circumstances. I do hope you have forgiven me for anything I said that may have offended you.”

“I took nothing you said as insult, Lance,” Britney said. “I know why you said it. I hope now you see that I am truly happy.” Britney smiled as Mr. Littrell waved back over his shoulder to her. “I know he is not the most social of men, and that he is not the most intelligent. But he has a good heart, and wishes to please me in every way. He has provided me with the best life I could have dreamt of.”

“You are happy, and that is all I could have wished for my friend,” Lance assured her. “You fit here better than I ever could have.”

“Yes, you are destined for something quite different, Lance.” Britney sighed. “I worry about you.”

“Worry about me?”

“I think we can assume that Howard will not be leaving home anytime soon,” Britney began, and Lance snorted. “Joshua has his pretty face to win him a partner, and Justin and Nickolas are the sort of boys that everyone loves.”

“And I? Am I the odd one out?”

“You are not odd. You are unique. You are handsome, and kind, and have a keen mind.”

“And you feel that I cannot find a partner who would respect and admire all that?” Lance frowned.
“I hope with all my heart that you find EXACTLY that person,” Britney told him.

They made the turn and started back towards the house. “When we arrive back home, we shall show you to your rooms. Your room, cousin Lance, has been recently redone and I will gladly show you all the changes we’ve made,” Mr. Littrell said.

“I look forward to it,” Lance replied, doing his best to keep a straight face.

They entered the house and removed their wraps. Mr. Littrell had his hand on the bannister to go upstairs when they heard something outside. “A carriage,” Jamie said, peering through the window.

“My word! It is Lord Louis!” Mr. Littrell flew out the door. Britney followed at a more sedate pace.

“What do you think, Lance?” Jamie said.

“I think it is rude to keep them out in the air, as it grows chilly,” Lance said. “It is a beautiful carriage, though.”

“I hope he does not come in,” Jamie said fearfully. “I do not wish to meet Lord Louis in this dress!”

“He is just a man, Jamie,” Lance said. “Just a man.”

The carriage drove away and Mr. Littrell could hardly keep from running again. “Cousin! Mr. Spears! Sister Jamie! What do you think? SUCH an honor.”

“We are all to dine at Rosings Park tomorrow evening,” Britney said, and her eyes were huge. “I did not expect an invitation so soon.”

“I expected we would be asked for tea on Sunday, but not for dinner so soon!” Mr. Littrell beamed. He bounded up the steps two at a time.

“An honor indeed,” Britney said as her father and sister followed her husband. “This is due to you, Lance.”

“Me?”

“While my sister and father are welcome visitors, you are an unknown quantity. I am sure he is very curious about you. You are someone new to instruct.”

“I eagerly await his instruction,” Lance said. “Whether I accept his advice is another matter entirely.”
Chapter 10

TEN

“Cousin, let me assure you that no matter what you wear today, it will be good enough for Rosings Park,” Mr. Littrell told Lance over breakfast. “While he himself is always put forth in the most fashionable of suits, he does not expect the same of his guests.”

“I thank you for your kind words, sir,” Lance said. He met Britney’s gaze and quickly looked down at his plate. When he’d composed himself, he said, “I hope that I find favor in his eyes as well as yours, as I arrive as a friend of your wife’s.”

“Why, Lance, I am happy to have you here in your own right, as my relative!” Mr. Littrell exclaimed. “There is not one thing I could possibly be ashamed of!”

“Again, I thank you.” Lance stood, unable to keep a straight face any longer. “I believe I will take a walk in your beautiful gardens, Mr. Littrell, if that is all right with you.”

“Of course! Enjoy the morning air,” Mr. Littrell declared. “Mrs. Littrell and I have a few items to attend to, matters of household, you see.”

“Excuse me.” Lance bowed to the table at large and escaped outside. He could not help but burst into laughter as soon as he was out of earshot. There were times he really did not know how Britney could bear it.

Mr. Littrell could not keep a proud smile from his face as he rang the bell at Rosings Park that evening. “Please, sister Jamie, do not fidget so! I assure you, Lord Louis is a kind man, and not a monster.”

“I am just so nervous,” Jamie said.

“Jamie, please,” Britney said, putting a hand on her sister’s arm. “Relax.”

The door opened and a butler looked down his nose at them. “Ah, Mr. Littrell. Mrs. Littrell. Good evening. The master is expecting you in the library.” He turned and led the way down the hall without another word.

“Beautiful,” Jamie whispered as they followed him. “Don’t you think so, Lance?”

“It is…ornate,” Lance answered, not at all impressed by the shining lamps and silk draperies. He felt, personally, that it was all a bit over the top.

“Mr. and Mrs. Littrell, sir,” the butler announced, opening the door to the library.

“Lord Louis!” Mr. Littrell rushed in the room and bowed deeply. “I cannot begin to thank you for…”

“Mrs. Littrell,” a voice barked from a seat by the fire. “Good of you to come. And I suppose these are your sister and father?”

“Yes, sir,” Britney answered. “And my very good friend, Lance.”
“Hmmm.” Lord Louis stood and came around his chair. He was a large man in an ill-fitting brown suit. The fabric clung to his abundant stomach, and Lance thought he looked a bit like an angry bull. “A pleasure.”

“An honor to meet you, sir,” Mr. Spears murmured, but Jamie could only curtsey. Lance bowed and said nothing.

“Please, arrange yourselves here.” Lord Louis sat back down. Mr. Spears took a chair to the side, obviously looking for a way to avoid conversation. Britney and her husband sat on one settee, and Lance and Jamie took the other.

“You have a…lovely home, sir,” Jamie managed.

“Thank you, my dear. It has been in the family for generations. It is not as ostentatious as my nephew’s home, Pemberly, but I feel it is appropriate for a man of my station.”

“Indeed, sir, Rosings Park is the most glorious house in the area. I told my dear Britney that…”

“I do not normally eat a large evening meal, but as you were to visit, I told my cook to spare no expense,” Lord Louis said to Britney. “I hope your family and friend will do it justice.”

“I thank you for your kindness,” Britney said softly.

They all looked at each other for a moment, then Lord Louis stood, offering Britney his arm. “Let me escort you to dinner.” He stalked out of the room without another word.

Lance was impressed by the table, although he was fairly certain the plates and goblets were not the finest Lord Louis’ home had to offer. The food was excellent, and he could find no fault in its service. Lord Louis led the conversation, of course, directing it mostly towards Britney. Mr. Littrell would occasionally attempt to make some sort of sycophantic comment, which Lord Louis, to his credit, routinely ignored.

The group moved to a large parlor after dinner, where tea was served. “Mrs. Littrell, your friend here seems an attractive sort of boy,” Lord Louis announced.

Lance blushed as Britney said, “Yes, he is, sir.”

“Tell me of your family,” Lord Louis said to Lance.

“Well…I am the second of five sons, sir.”

“Five sons! And are they all out in society?”

“Yes, sir, although I do not know that the youngest two should be,” Lance said.

“All out? The eldest, is he spoken for?”

“Not that I am aware of, sir,” Lance said truthfully.

“All out and none engaged.” Lord Louis shook his head. “I am surprised that your parents would allow it.”

“Honestly, sir, if the youngest was to wait for the eldest to become engaged, he may never be out at all,” Lance said. “It wouldn’t be fair.”

“You seem to have a lot to say, sir,” Lord Louis barked, glaring at Lance. Lance calmly looked back.
“I speak what I feel, sir.”

“Do you sing or play?”

“I sing, but not well,” Lance said. “My eldest brother, Joshua, is the artist in the family. He sings, plays pianoforte, and draws.”

“A sign of a truly accomplished young man,” Lord Louis said approvingly. “It is a shame you could not follow in his footsteps.” He sighed. “My nephew, Kristopher, is a very accomplished young man. He has had the best teachers, whether it be in music, drawing, or dance. I assume you and your brothers were tutored?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lance said. “We attended the local school, as my father could not afford special instruction for us all. In fact, much of the instruction for my youngest brothers was provided by Joshua and myself.”

“I see.” Lord Louis frowned. He turned to Jamie Spears. “Tell me, young lady, where were you educated?” Jamie squeaked out a reply, but the man’s gaze returned to Lance. “Mrs. Littrell, when it is time to educate YOUR children, I do hope you will come to me so we may speak together. I have many suggestions as to the best tutors and subjects.”

“I thank you for your interest, sir,” Britney said politely.

“Mr. Harless, you mentioned an older brother. He did not wish to accompany you?”

“Well, sir, while Mrs. Littrell is a good friend to our entire family, she and I have always been particularly close,” Lance answered. “My brother is currently visiting with my aunt and uncle in town, and will soon return home. Our father misses us both, and we do not wish to have him bereft for long.”

“A father has better things to do than worry about where his children are,” Lord Louis said.

“Well, sir, our father enjoys intelligent conversation, and he has it most when Joshua and I are in attendance,” Lance answered.

“Hmm,” Lord Louis said, frowning.

The first two weeks of their visit passed slowly, as things soon fell into a monotony of daily walks and visits to Rosings Park every other day. It was soon announced that Mr. McLean and his cousin, Colonel Lachey, would be coming to visit their aunt, and Lance did not know what to think. He was fairly certain that Mr. McLean had done something to change Mr. Kirkpatrick’s mind about Joshua, and he was worried that he would not be able to refrain from asking the question straight out.

“I understand you have met my nephew, Mr. Harless,” Lord Louis said on the night before the men were due to arrive.

“I have made Mr. McLean’s acquaintance, yes, sir,” Lance said. “He and his friend spent some time in our neighborhood.”

“Yes, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Lord Louis said. “Darling boy. McLean quite dotes on me. He visits as often as he can.”

“You are fortunate to have such nephews,” Lance said.
“Indeed,” Lord Louis said, eyeing him curiously. “Well, after McLean and I have had a good long visit, we will have you all over for dinner.”

“Even in the midst of a family reunion, you think of us. I cannot express my gratitude enough, sir,” Mr. Littrell simpered. As usual, Lord Louis ignored him.

The next morning, Mr. Littrell came hurrying in from his garden. “My dear, Mr. McLean and the Colonel have arrived! I must go up to pay my respects.”

“Perhaps you should give them time to meet with Lord Louis,” Britney said wisely. “I would advise you to finish your weeding, and then after you’ve cleaned up, you could go to Rosings Park. That way everyone will be settled in nicely.”

“Of course. Lord Louis will want quality time with his nephews,” Mr. Littrell agreed. “I will do as you suggest.”

Lance watched Mr. Littrell walk back outside. “You have a tactful way of dealing with things, Britney. I am impressed.”

“I’ve found that if one manages to involve the correct behavior in regards to Lord Louis, one may manipulate the situation at hand,” Britney said with a grin.

A few hours later, Mr. Littrell hurried off to Rosings Park to pay his respects. Britney was busy throughout the house, and Lance took the opportunity to sit down and write a letter to Joshua.

Dearest Brother,

As I have mentioned to you in other letters, Lord Louis is quite attentive to Britney and the running of her household. There are constant suggestions as to the best way to fold a dress, iron a tablecover, hem a sheet and prepare a stew. One would think that someone of his stature would not be bothered by such trifling occupations, but Lord Louis is definitely the type of master with a finger in every domestic pie. Often his suggestions are completely ridiculous; he seems to forget that not everyone has his fortune, or the leisure time he enjoys.

If Mr. Littrell is out in the garden and a carriage rolls by, he quickly jumps up to see if it is Lord Louis, so he may pay the proper respect. I am concerned for his health, as this constant up and down is not very healthy for his back and neck. I will say this for our cousin: he is very attentive to the people in his parish, and is often called from dinner to visit someone at their home.

I feel that

“Lance!” Britney rushed into the parlor room. “My husband approaches with Mr. McLean and another man who I can only assume to be Colonel Lachey!”

“Really?” Lance stood up. “Did you expect that they would come?”

“No, of course not. This is thanks to you, Lance. Mr. McLean would never come this soon to wait on me alone.”
Britney did not have time to retrieve her father or sister, so she and Lance met the group alone. “Mrs. Littrell, may I present Mr. McLean and Colonel Lachey?” Mr. Littrell said, beaming.

“We met before, ma’am, prior to your marriage,” Mr. McLean said, bending over her hand. “It is very nice to see you again.”

“And you, sir.” Britney curtsied. “I know you have met my friend, but Colonel Lachey, may I present Mr. Lance Harless?”

“An honor, sir.” Colonel Lachey bowed low, but his blue eyes twinkled. He had a ready smile, and the deepest dimples Lance had ever seen.

“Please, gentlemen, sit.” Britney gestured to some chairs, as her husband seemed too overwhelmed by his guests to remember his manners. “Shall I ring for tea?”

“No, thank you, as we cannot stay long.” Mr. McLean sat on a chair. Colonel Lachey took a seat on the settee by Lance.

“How do you like the country so far, Mr. Harless? I understand from Mr. Littrell that you are not from the area.”

“Call me Lance, please. It is a beautiful country, and I am impressed by the hard work Mr. Littrell has put into his gardens,” Lance replied. Mr. Littrell smiled modestly. “Of course, I am also impressed by the beauty of Rosings Park.”

Colonel Lachey laughed. “I am impressed by YOU, sir, for you speak so sincerely I might almost believe you.”

Lance could not help smiling back. “True, the décor is a bit…ornate…for my taste, but I suppose when one has money, one might want to show it a bit.”

“How does your family fare, Lance?” Mr. McLean asked suddenly, and Lance started a bit.

“Well, they…they are fine, sir, thank you. I have a letter from my brother Howard just yesterday, and everyone is in good health.” Lance paused, then said, “My eldest brother has been in town these few months. Have you not happened to see him there?”

“I…no. I did not have the pleasure,” Mr. McLean stammered to Lance’s surprise. He stood. “Come, Lachey. Our uncle will be waiting for us.” He bowed sharply. “Until we meet again.” He left the room without another word, Mr. Littrell on his heels.

“Well, I suppose we are leaving, then.” Colonel Lachey stood and bowed. “Mrs. Littrell, a pleasure meeting you. Lance…I hope to see you again soon. I am sure you will be invited for dinner during our stay.”

“I look forward to it,” Lance said. He watched out the window as Colonel Lachey hurried to catch up to his cousin.

It was almost a week until their presence was requested at Rosings Park, and Lance was fairly certain it was due to the fact that Lord Louis wanted to keep his nephews’ attention on himself. As Lance dressed for dinner that evening, he thought about Mr. McLean and what part, if any, he had in keeping Mr. Kirkpatrick from seeing Joshua in London. His thoughts then drifted to the amiable Colonel Lachey. Lance wondered how the two men could possibly be related. Then again, they
were both related to Lord Louis.

Upon their arrival, Colonel Lachey was immediately at Lance’s side, and made sure to sit by him as they visited. He asked about Lance’s home and his family, and discussed the upcoming trip Lance was to undertake. The colonel then began talking about a play he had seen in London, and their conversation moved to music.

Both Lord Louis and Mr. McLean could not fail to notice the attention the colonel was paying to Lance, and Lord Louis could finally stand it no longer. “I must know what you two are speaking of.”

“Music, sir,” the colonel said, sighing and making a face at Lance.

“Well, you must allow us all to join in this conversation! I love music. If I were not born to this life, I would often fancy myself as the director of a play, or the manager of some great talent,” Lord Louis said with a sigh. “I do not play or sing myself, but I do so respect the talent in others.” He turned to Mr. McLean. “How does Kristopher get on, McLean?”

“Very well. He constantly practices.”

“As he should,” Lord Louis said with a nod. “I’ve told Mr. Harless repeatedly that one cannot improve oneself without practice.”

“Mr. Harless has promised to play for us after dinner,” Colonel Lachey announced, and Lance turned pink.

“I have promised no such thing, but now that you’ve said it, I must fulfill this false promise,” Lance said. “I assure you that you will wish you had never told such a falsehood. I am not very good.”

“I do not feel, Lachey, that you should make Lance do something that causes him such discomfort,” McLean said, glaring at his cousin. “It is not proper.”

“And Mr. McLean is quite knowledgeable about EVERYTHING proper,” Lance said in a mocking tone. “He is so proper that he could not find it within himself to dance with anyone but his acquaintances at a ball I attended.”

“That is not true,” Mr. McLean protested. “I do not recommend myself well to strangers, and therefore did not feel I could dance with them.”

“You left many a willing partner standing along the wall,” Lance pointed out. He wished there was a way he could bring up the way Mr. McLean had slighted him in particular, but he did not feel it was right.

“So, this is how my cousin behaves in public when I am not around to see it?” Colonel Lachey said with a chuckle.

“Oh, I assure you that his behavior is completely appropriate,” Lance informed him. “He just does not allow anyone to view his true personality.”

“And what do you believe my true personality to be, sir?” Mr. McLean asked quietly. His eyes were dark as they studied Lance.

Lance lost his nerve. “I…I’m sure I do not know, sir,” he replied finally. The dinner bell rang, and with visible relief, he allowed Colonel Lachey to escort him in.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Please allow me to point out that in this chapter, I grabbed some of Jane Austen's dialogue and used it verbatim. There is NO way I can take credit for words this good. I felt the need to point it out, because I do not in ANY way want to be accused of plagiarism. This is one of my favorite chapters from the original book, and I could not help but borrow a few lines.

ELEVEN

The next morning, Lance was sitting and reading in the front parlor. Jamie, Mr. Spears and Britney had gone to the village, and Mr. Littrell was on a call. The doorbell rang, startling Lance. He had heard no carriage, so he groaned as he realized it was most likely Lord Louis. He stood and straightened his jacket.

“Mr. McLean,” the maid announced. Lance’s eyes widened at finding Mr. McLean alone.

It was apparent that the man felt the same way. “I…I do apologize for intruding on your solitude. I did not expect to find you alone.”

“Everyone is out and about,” Lance said, waving his hand nervously. “Please do sit down.”

“Thank you.” Mr. McLean held his hat, tapping it on his knee.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Lance blurted out, “How suddenly you all left Netherfield, sir! We do miss your party. I hope that Mr. Kirkpatrick and his sisters were well when you saw them last.”

“Perfectly so, I thank you.”

Lance had hoped to get some sort of explanation as to why they all left, but it was quickly obvious that explanation would not be forthcoming. “If gossip is to be believed, he does not plan on returning anytime soon?”

“We have not explicitly discussed it, but I do not think he will be spending much time at Netherfield in the future,” Mr. McLean answered. “I would not be surprised if he would give it up as soon as he gets a decent offer.”

“I see,” Lance said, desperate to ask about Joshua and knowing he could not.

“This is a very comfortable house,” Mr. McLean said, looking around. “I know Mr. Littrell has done much to improve it…including making a fortunate choice of a wife.”

“Yes…I believe his quite fortunate in finding someone like Britney to accept him,” Lance answered, smiling as he thought of his friend. “I did not originally feel it was a wise decision for her to make, but she seems happy here.”

“She is lucky to be within such a close distance of her family and friends,” Mr. McLean said, and he
seemed to watch Lance carefully as he said it.

“Close distance! It must be forty or fifty miles!” Lance exclaimed.

“Would you feel that was too far a distance to be from YOUR family?” Mr. McLean asked, and Lance was taken aback.

“Well, it is true that I would miss my father and Joshua,” he said finally. “It would all depend on the details of the situation, I suppose.”

“Are you pleased with Kent?” Mr. McLean asked, abruptly changing the subject. They began to discuss the country in an emotionless conversation that continued until the others returned. Mr. McLean stayed for another fifteen minutes, saying very little, then finally excused himself.

Britney drew Lance aside. “I was never so shocked in my life as I was when I walked in and found you together.”

“Not half as surprised as I was,” Lance informed her. “That was the strangest thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“I know why he came,” Britney said, poking Lance in the side. “He must be in love with you.”

Lance snorted. “I will pretend I did not hear such foolishness. I am sure he was so bored with the company he keeps at Rosings Park that he left in search of SOME amusement.”

It seemed that Lance’s assumption was true, as Mr. McLean and Colonel Lachey found a reason to drop by almost every day. Sometimes they sat out in Mr. Littrell’s garden, and other times they gathered around the fire if the day was less than pleasant. Lance was thankful that Mr. Littrell’s vocation often called him from the home, as he could not bear the man’s constant bowing and scraping before the visitors. It was obvious that Colonel Lachey came because he enjoyed their society. He spoke with them all, but his focus was often on Lance. Mr. McLean mostly sat in silence, something that Colonel Lachey commented on once or twice before allowing the topic to drop.

The visitors often came in the afternoon, so Lance fell into the practice of taking his walks in the morning. After a week of this, he started finding Mr. McLean at the edge of the garden, almost seeming to be in wait for him. They would walk together for about ten or fifteen minutes, and in these instances, Mr. McLean actually did most of the talking. He revealed very little about himself, except his deep affection for his younger brother. It was this sign of emotion that allowed Lance to bear the other times when Mr. McLean seemed almost not human. He would often ask Lance questions about family, about his hopes for future happiness, and other things which confused Lance greatly.

They met three days in a row, and on the fourth morning, Lance was shocked to find Colonel Lachey on the path and not Mr. McLean. “What a pleasant surprise!” Lance bowed and smiled.

“I think you are most attractive when outdoors, if I may say so,” Colonel Lachey said in greeting. “Your eyes reflect the brightness of the grass, and your cheeks are a most becoming pink.”

“Sir,” Lance murmured, blushing even more. “I did not know you walked this way often.”

“I do not,” the colonel admitted. “I leave Saturday, as you know. With every visit to Rosings Park, I make sure to take a wide turn about the gardens. I was going to complete my walk with a visit to the Parsonage, and here you are.”

“Yes.” They walked for a moment, and Lance asked, “Do you meet with Mr. McLean often?”
“Not as often as I’d like,” the colonel answered. “I know this surprises you, because I realize you do not feel he is a person one would wish to spend time with. However, we are almost like brothers, and our lives are twined even more with our joint guardianship of his brother.”

“I have heard much of him from ladies of my acquaintance…Mrs. Hurst and Miss Kirkpatrick. They hold him in great esteem.”

“I know them a little…their brother is a great friend of McLean’s. He seems a pleasant, gentlemanlike man.”

“Yes…they are great friends. It seems that Mr. McLean feels the need to see after Mr. Kirkpatrick in the same way you both see after your ward.”

“Well, yes, I agree. Mr. McLean does attempt to “look after” Kirkpatrick, for lack of a better turn of phrase,” Colonel Lachey said. He pointed to a bench. “Come, let us sit a moment.”

“Thank you.” Lance sat down. “You were saying?”

“From something McLean told me in the carriage on our way here, I believe that Kirkpatrick owes him much.” Colonel Lachey paused. “However, perhaps I should not speak of it. I am not completely sure it was Kirkpatrick he spoke of.”

“I will not mention it,” Lance promised, leaning forward a bit.

“McLean congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent partnership,” the colonel said. “He did not mention Kirkpatrick by name, but from what I know of the man, he is eager to be liked, happy to be adored, and perhaps may have allowed his heart to lead him wrong.”

“Did Mr. McLean give you a reason why he felt the need to interfere?”

“There were strong objections against the gentleman in question,” the colonel answered. “Other than that, I know nothing.”

“Hmm,” Lance said, frowning. He was very thankful to be sitting down.

“You are displeased,” Colonel Lachey realized.

“What right does Mr. McLean have to judge the situation and try to lead Mr. Kirkpatrick’s feelings one way or another?” Lance said almost angrily. “It is not his place to decide what would make his friend happy.” Lance took a deep breath and composed himself. “Of course, as we know none of the details, I cannot judge, either.”

“Correct,” the colonel said. “You do not look well…perhaps it is too windy here. Shall we return to the Parsonage?”

“Please,” Lance said, and allowed the colonel to lead the way.

Lance was thankful that the colonel only stayed for a short while, and that Mr. McLean did not visit at all that day. He excused himself, claiming a headache, and when he reached his chamber, he fell upon the bed. It was as Lance had expected all along. Mr. McLean felt that Joshua and his family were not good enough, and THAT was why he had convinced Mr. Kirkpatrick to leave Netherfield. Lance actually could not blame him, when he allowed himself to really think about the situation. Their mother was an embarrassment, and Justin and Nickolas could bring nothing positive to their family with their behavior in public.
After pacing the floor for an hour, he did indeed find himself with an aching head. He took to his bed early, skipping dinner and sending his regards to Britney. Britney sent up a tray with a light meal, but Lance could not eat. He himself did not mind if he was single forever, but Joshua deserved the best of everything life had to offer.

The next day, the household was supposed to go to Rosings Park for lunch. Lance asked to be excused, claiming he still had a headache.

“I fear Lord Louis will be most offended,” Mr. Littrell said with a frown. “I know he had his cooks prepare a special salad for lunch.”

“Well, I am sorry if he is offended, but I am sure he would be MORE offended if I were rude and discourteous due to my headache,” Lance all but snapped.

“My dear, I am sure Lord Louis will understand,” Britney said before Mr. Littrell could reply. “Perhaps if you asked him for suggestions of a remedy.”

“Oh yes, Mrs. Littrell, you are right, as usual,” Mr. Littrell said, beaming. “I am sure he will be most amiable in recommending a cure for my young cousin.”

“Please rest, Lance,” Britney said as she put on her hat. “I hate to think of you feeling so poorly.”

“Some peace and quiet is all I need, I’m sure;” Lance said. He waved at them as they headed out, then went to the parlor. He sat by the window, staring out into the sunny morning.

He was so deep in his thoughts that he did not hear the doorbell. “Mr. McLean for you, sir,” the maid announced.

“Mr. McLean for you, sir,” Mr. McLean said, looking impeccable in a dark blue suit.

“Good…good afternoon.” Lance blushed as he righted his chair. “I am sure you know the others are at Rosings for lunch.”

“Yes. I excused myself,” Mr. McLean said simply. “May I?” He pointed to a chair.

“Yes, of course. Shall I ring for refreshments?”

“No, thank you, unless you wish for some.”

“No.” Lance sat down, his hands clenched together. Mr. McLean took the seat, crossed and uncrossed his legs, then stood. He fidgeted a moment, then sat down, but soon stood again. Lance stared at him, the nervousness something he had not observed in Mr. McLean before. “Are you quite well?” Lance asked finally.

Mr. McLean walked towards him. “Mr. Harless…Lance…” He waved a hand in the air, then took a deep breath. “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Lance felt as if all the air had mysteriously disappeared from the room. He stared, moved his mouth a bit, and felt his face redden. “I…”

“You must know that I have struggled with these feelings, trying my best to overpower them,” Mr. McLean continued. “While you are an attractive young man with obvious intelligence and a good
heart, there are other issues which will take precedence over such things. You are the son of a gentleman, yet there is still a definite chasm between our families. Your uncles have nothing to recommend the family. It was a battle indeed, but I have fought the good fight to its conclusion.” Lance slowly stood, and Mr. McLean came to stand in front of him. “My attachment to you is so strong that it wins over all good sense, all possible obstacles. I pray you can see the warmth of my feelings, and that you will reward my struggle by accepting my proposal.”

Lance walked around him and leaned on the mantle for a long moment. When he turned around, his face was red, but it was not the blush of delight that colored his cheeks. “I have been proposed to once before, sir, and I know that the proper way to decline is to say no gratefully. But I am NOT grateful. I have never desired your good opinion, and if you’ve ever given it to me, it has been most unwillingly. It is apparent that I have caused you pain and strife, something I would not wish on even my greatest enemy. For that I apologize.”

Mr. McLean looked genuinely shocked. “You refuse me thus?”

“You are insulted,” Lance replied. “Well, we are on an even field, then. You, who offend and insult me by stating you admire me against your will, against your reason, against all that is within you! Even if I could look past that to the supposed affection you have for me, there is NO way I could accept the man who has been the means for ruining the happiness of a very beloved brother.” Mr. McLean stared at Lance, his face turning as red as his. “I have every reason in the world to refuse you, sir. There is no reason you can give me to justify your behavior there. You cannot deny that you were one of the means of dividing Mr. Kirkpatrick and my brother, if not the primary mean. Can you deny any of it?”

“I will not deny it. I did everything within your power to separate your brother and my friend. I rejoice in my success, as I am sure he will be much happier than I am now.”

“It not just because of how you’ve wronged my brother that I express these feelings,” Lance continued. “Shall I begin on the way you have treated Mr. Lambert?”

“Ah…you take quite an interest in him and his concerns,” Mr. McLean said, his voice tight with anger.

“Anyone who knows the unfortunate history of his life must take an interest.”

“His unfortunate history! Yes, he has been most unfortunate,” Mr. McLean said in a mocking tone. “Your opinion of me is created by the interest in my friend, whom I wished to keep from making a horrible mistake. Your opinion is created by the stories of someone who tells you how I ruined his life. I am sure none of it has to do with any possible slight I may have given months ago?” Lance swallowed hard and said nothing. “I am not ashamed of my behavior, or even of my feelings now. Could you possibly expect me to look forward to the family I would inherit if I chose you? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?”

Lance turned back to the mantle and clenched its edge so tight he hurt his hand. “I was mistaken, sir. I am quite glad that you proposed the way you did. If you had behaved in a more civil manner, I would have been embarrassed to refuse you in the way I truly wanted.” Lance slowly turned around, head held high. “You could not have made the offer of your hand in any way possible that would have tempted me to accept it. From the moment of our acquaintance, you proved yourself an arrogant, conceited, selfish man. I had not known you a month before I knew that you would be the last man in the world I would ever align myself with.”

Mr. McLean’s dark eyes looked away from Lance as he tried to contain his anger. “You have said
quite enough, sir. I understand you completely. Forgive me for taking up so much of your time. I wish you a safe journey, and best wishes for your future health and happiness.”

Lance watched him storm from the room, then fell weakly into a chair.
TWELVE

When Lance awoke the next morning, he did not feel as if he had closed his eyes for one moment. He had survived a restless night, sleeping in half-hour increments, constantly awaking to the sound of Mr. McLean’s voice in his ears. Deep down, he could only agree with Mr. McLean regarding the behavior of his mother and brothers. Regarding Joshua, however, he could not find anything to forgive.

Lance sat with the others at breakfast, but did not eat much. His mind was much distracted, and it took Mr. Littrell saying something three times before Lance finally took notice. “I beg your pardon, sir,” Lance said, giving him a wan smile. “My mind was elsewhere.”

“Ah, and I am sure I know where,” Mr. Littrell said with a beaming smile. “You are soon to leave us, and you already are thinking of the sad parting to come.”

“I am sure that is some of it,” Lance said.

“You look tired, Lance,” Britney said sympathetically. “Perhaps some fresh air?”

“I do not think it will hurt.” Lance stood. “As long as you do not need me here.”

“No. Go.” Britney waved a hand in the air.

Lance found his jacket and went out into the cool morning air. He began to take his normal path, but realized that Mr. McLean knew where to find him. He took another turn, and ended up on the small path that ran at the edge of the property. Lance sighed as he looked around. It was a beautiful country, but the recent happenings had done much to ruin it in his eyes.

“Lance…Mr. Harless.”

Lance winced as he heard the all too familiar voice and the accompanying footsteps. He slowly turned around. “Mr. McLean.”

“I have been walking for quite a while this morning, hoping to find you,” Mr. McLean said. Lance’s eyes widened. “Do not fear. I simply wished to give you this letter…and I hope you will do me the honor of reading it.” Mr. McLean held out an envelope. When Lance took it, Mr. McLean bowed and turned back down the lane.

Lance resisted the temptation to open the letter immediately. Instead, he walked down the path at a sedate pace until he reached a place where he could sit. He opened the envelope with shaking hands.

“Please do not be alarmed, Lance, at the sight of this letter. I do not write to continue our conversation, or to beg for your hand once more. I simply wish to explain myself regarding two topics that are of great importance to you: the treatment of your brother, and the situation regarding Adam Lambert.

“We had not been long at Netherfield before I realized that Mr. Kirkpatrick was quite taken by your brother. At the Netherfield ball, however, it was made even more apparent by his public attachment towards him. I was slightly amused by Christopher’s behavior…but then I began to watch your brother. While your brother was charming and amiable, as is his nature, he did not seem to treat my friend with any special regard. It did not seem as if he saw my friend as anything more than a
temporary diversion…and it was because of this that I led my friend in another direction. This idea was aided by the behavior of your mother and brothers. I do not wish to insult you by mentioning this, and I respect your intelligence too much to assume you do not realize it yourself. Please allow me to insert one more compliment here: the behavior of you and your brother Joshua has always been pleasing and honorable, and in no way a negative reflection upon your family.

“It was quite easy to convince Christopher that the idea was mere folly. He left for London immediately, as you know. My attempts at convincing him were assisted by his own sisters. I had no trouble making sure that he would not plan on returning to Netherfield any time soon. There is one thing I do regret…I did everything I could to assure that he would not know your brother was in London. I knew it, and, of course, Miss Kirkpatrick knew it, but Christopher did not. Please believe me when I say I respect and admire your brother very much, and did not mean to hurt him in any way.

“With respect to the other accusation of doing some harm to Mr. Lambert, I can only give my side by explaining the entirety of our history, and his connection to our family. I cannot say what he has told you exactly, what he accuses me of. I can only tell you the truth.

“Adam Lambert is the son of a very kind and worthy man, who had the job of running our estates for years. Everyone who met the elder Mr. Lambert trusted and valued him, and, of course, gave that courtesy to his son. My father supported Adam at school. Gave him spending money. I myself attended the same school, and we ran together, as old friends would. It did not take long, however, for me to see Adam Lambert’s true colors. He ran through his money, and quickly made friends with richer men who were drawn in by his charm and good humor. I saw through his façade quite quickly…but he made sure my father never did.

“When my honored father passed away about five years ago, his will recommended that I please promote Mr. Lambert’s best interests as best I could. He noted that if Mr. Lambert took orders, a valuable family living would be his as soon as it was vacated. As soon as this was known, Adam Lambert wrote to me and informed me that he did not wish to take orders, but instead would study law. He felt that a legacy of some worth could be given instead of the living. Against my better wishes, I did so, and he went through that money quickly from what I heard, as we broke all contact soon after. Per various common acquaintances, I heard that he barely scratched out a living in town, and was constantly in the company of less than appropriate men and women. I was more than happy to have no contact with him.

Unfortunately, I was forced to make contact once more last summer. What I write hereafter is something very difficult to discuss, but I feel it is imperative that you hear it from me and understand. I know that you will respect my family and I enough to keep the utmost secrecy. My brother, Kristopher, was left to the guardianship of Colonel Lachey and myself. About a year ago, he was taken from school and a residence was formed for him in London. Last summer, he went to Ramsgate with the lady who ran the home, Mrs. Younge. I will only say that we were very ill deceived in this woman’s character, or I would not have for one moment left Kristopher in her care. Mrs. Younge was apparently “good friends” with Adam Lambert, and they made plans to meet once in Ramsgate. Kristopher remembered Adam, and how kind he had been to a young boy. They share a taste in music, and Adam was always kind to Kristopher. I am sure my brother remembered this, and trusted Adam completely. Adam had no difficulty convincing my naïve, gentle brother that he was in love, and that they should elope. I happened to join them a day or two prior to the event, and Kristopher was unable to keep the secret from me. You can imagine how I felt, what I wanted to do. I was unable to do anything publicly, as I did not want to drag my brother’s name through the proverbial mud. I wrote to Mr. Lambert, who conveniently disappeared. As you’ve probably realized, Mr. Lambert’s chief object was my brother’s fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds. I have no proof, but I also assume that he wanted some sort of revenge on me.
“Sir, this is the complete truth regarding everything that has passed between Mr. Lambert and myself. I do not know what he has told you, but this is the true history. If my word is not enough, you may feel free to discuss it with Colonel Lachey, as he knows all.

“I have nothing more to add except that I hope God blesses you and keeps you safe and healthy.

“ALEXANDER MCLEAN”

Lance stared into space, the pages of the letter fluttering in the breeze. When he’d started to read the letter, he had been angry, and expected to continue to feel that way throughout the letter. Lance was not surprised that Mr. McLean felt no true regret in his dealings regarding Mr. Kirkpatrick; it was the behavior of a proud, stubborn man. The mention of the behavior of Lance’s mother and brothers could not help but dig deep, and even the compliment to Joshua and himself could not make it any less painful.

When Lance reached the second part of the letter, however, his anger began to fade. He could only imagine the horror and embarrassment Mr. McLean had felt. How relieved he must have been that he chose that moment to visit his brother! And poor Kristopher…to think oneself in love, and then to be so cruelly used by someone you’d trusted since childhood. Lance reread that section multiple times, trying to find some string of falsehood that could pull the story apart, but it was no use. Mr. Lambert was the villain. Lance could only agree with Mr. McLean’s description of Adam’s charm; Lance himself had fallen under its spell. Any history given to Lance regarding Mr. Lambert was provided by the man himself. No one knew anything about him prior to his arrival with the militia. It was apparent that he had cast a spell over everyone else simply by trying to charm them, and not by any strength of his own character. And now Lance knew why Adam had stopped showing interest in anyone else when Mr. King had arrived. Mr. King had a fortune.

Lance began to walk, deep in thought, and it was two hours before he returned to the house. He found that both Mr. McLean and Colonel Lachey had called to say goodbye, and the colonel had sat for over a half-hour waiting for him, but Lance was glad he had missed them both. All he could think of was the letter.

Mr. Spears had returned home the week before Jamie and Lance were to leave, so they prepared to travel on their own. Lord Louis did not think this a wise idea, and proclaimed quite loudly that they should have an adult male to travel with them. Lance tried to point out that he was himself an adult male, but Lord Louis would hear none of his explanation. He did finally shake hands with them, telling them that they were welcome to visit Rosings Park at any time, as long as they gave him a month’s notice.

On the morning they were to leave, Lance was the first one downstairs. He wanted to have a quick breakfast before packing his last few items. He was surprised to find his cousin already at the table.

“Ahh, Cousin Lance…I was hoping we’d have a few moments alone.” Mr. Littrell motioned to a chair, and Lance sat. “So, you prepare to leave us. I hope your visit has been an enjoyable one.”

“Your hospitality has been better than I could have expected even at Rosings Park,” Lance said, feeling this was the utmost praise he could bestow.

“I doubt that, but I do believe we provided nicely for you,” Mr. Littrell said, blushing slightly. “And I hope that you can return home and tell everyone that my Britney has settled into quite the happy life here.”
“I cannot deny her happiness, sir,” Lance said honestly. “You have provided a warm and happy home for my friend.”

“That is all I could hope for,” Mr. Littrell said. He gave a short bow and left the room.

Jamie and Lance finished packing, and the trunks were loaded on the carriage upon its arrival. They were to travel alone to London, where they would retrieve Joshua. They would then travel in their uncle’s carriage to a small town halfway between London and home, where they would transfer to Mr. Harless’ carriage.

“I shall miss you,” Britney said, giving Lance a long hug. “Please give my regards to your parents.”

“Thank you for a wonderful visit.” Lance pulled back and kissed her cheek. “It gives my soul much relief to see you so happy.”

“Thank you.” Britney squeezed his arm, then hugged her sister.

Jamie and Lance settled into the carriage as it pulled out, waving and calling last goodbyes out the window. “I cannot believe our visit has ended already,” Jamie said with a sigh. “How much I shall have to tell.”

“And how much I have to conceal,” Lance thought to himself.

When they arrived in London, Mrs. Bass was waving at them from the front stoop. “It is so wonderful to see you! Did you enjoy your visit?”

“Yes, very much, although I am relieved to finally be going home,” Lance said. “Where is Joshua?”

“He’s inside,” Mrs. Bass said. “Eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

Joshua hurried into the hall as soon as Lance went in. “Lance!” They hugged. “How was your trip? You must tell me everything you omitted from your letters!”

It was on the tip of Lance’s tongue to say everything he had learned, but he realized this was not the time nor place to do so. “I could describe Rosings Park for an hour and you would not begin to know the ugliness of it,” Lance said, linking his arm through Joshua’s and walking back towards the parlor.

Jamie and Lance spent a week in London, enjoying the many entertainments Mrs. Bass had arranged for them. It was finally time to travel home, however, and Lance was ready to get back in the carriage.

“I look forward to our holiday, Lance,” Mrs. Bass said when she kissed him goodbye.

“As do I, Aunt,” he replied. “I am glad that we have some time at home, however…I fear that Papa is more than likely at his wits’ end right now without us.”

“I agree.” Mrs. Bass embraced Jamie, then Joshua.

After about an hour in the carriage, Jamie dozed off against the side wall. Joshua looked at Lance. “There is something you are not telling me,” he said. “I have noticed it all week.”

“It is nothing,” Lance said immediately, then paused. “No, that is not true. It is SOMETHING, but we have not had the appropriate amount of time or level of privacy. I assure you that it is nothing
“Now you make me even more curious,” Joshua said.

“I promise you, Joshua…it can wait.” Lance leaned back against the seat cushion, his head on Joshua’s shoulder.

Lance fell asleep as well, and was awakened by Joshua’s quiet exclamation of, “What in the world are THEY doing here?”

Lance sat up and rubbed his eyes, leaning over Joshua to look out the window. “Good Lord,” he groaned quietly.

“Joshua! Lance!” Justin leaned out of the inn’s window, waving madly. “Surprise!”

Joshua, Lance and Jamie climbed out of the carriage, stretching and groaning. They made their way up to the dining room of the inn, where Justin and Nickolas were bouncing up and down. “Is this not a wonderful surprise?” Nickolas said, beaming at them.

“We thought we would meet you and provide a meal,” Justin said, waving at the table. “You’ll need to loan us money, though…we had ever so long to wait, and we ended up at the shops across the way.”

“Justin bought a HORRIBLE hat,” Nickolas informed them.

“Yes, it’s ugly,” Justin admitted. “But perhaps I can make something of it. Come, sit down!” He took the head chair and pointed to the table. “Don’t waste it!”

Lance sighed and sat down. He WAS hungry. “How is everyone at home? How are Papa and Mamma?”

“You’ll be seeing them shortly, Lance,” Nickolas said with an eye roll. “But everyone is well.”

“Everyone but US,” Justin moaned dramatically, dropping his chin into his palm. “It doesn’t matter WHAT my hat looks like, for the militia are to leave Meryton within a fortnight!”

“Are they!” Lance asked with pleasure.

“Yes. They are going to Brighton.” Justin’s lower lip dropped into an adorable pout. “I have asked and asked Papa to take us to Brighton. It would be a wonderful holiday, hardly cost a thing, and Mamma thinks it a wonderful idea.”

“Of course she does,” Lance sighed. “A strange town full of soldiers is the LAST thing anyone in this family needs.”

“There is one thing we have to tell that is most diverting,” Nickolas said, looking at Justin and grinning. “I believe YOU will be particular interested, Lance.”

“Do tell,” Lance said wryly.

“There is NO chance of Mr. Lambert pairing up with Mr. King. Mr. King has left for good…gone to Liverpool to stay with his uncle,” Nickolas crowed. “Mr. Lambert is safe!”

“More like Mr. King is safe,” Lance said.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Justin said, rolling his eyes. “But then I never do. Come on,
The group ate amidst a lively conversation, held mostly by Justin and Nickolas. They continued to talk as they left the dining room and piled into the carriage. It was a fairly tight fit, as Joshua, Nickolas and Justin were all rather tall. “Now…let us hear what has happened to you all while you were gone,” Nickolas said. Lance was surprised by his interest.

“Did you meet anyone?” Justin asked. “I hoped you would start finding wives or partners while you were gone, so WE could officially start looking!”

Joshua blushed and looked out the window. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Justin,” Lance said. “There was not much to choose from where we were, and I’m sure Joshua did not travel to London simply to find a partner.”

“Well, if I were to find someone, I would be able to chaperone YOU all around town,” Justin said. “I would find all the best parties, and the most fun! You should have seen it while you were gone… Colonel Foster’s wife and I have become fast friends, and we were the center of every party while you were gone.”

“I’m sure you were,” Lance said.

“You were not the center of EVERY party,” Nickolas said, and the two brothers bickered the rest of the ride.

Lance was eager to arrive home for many reasons. The first of which was the man who appeared on the front step almost before the carriage stopped moving. “Ah, here you are,” said his father. Lance embraced him. “I am glad you have returned, Lance.”

“As am I, Papa,” Lance replied, smiling. “If this carriage ride back from the inn is any example of what you have gone through during my absence, I am surprised to find you still sane.”

“The weather has been good, and thankfully they have found much reason to be out of the house,” Mr. Harless said, patting Lance on the shoulder.

Lynn welcomed them all as well, and Mrs. Spears soon arrived to see to Jamie. The Spears ladies left, and the family was finally allowed to settle back to normal.

Lance and Joshua’s trunks were delivered to their room, and Lance suggested to Joshua that they unpack the things they didn’t want the maid to see to. As soon as they were in their room, Lance shut the door and leaned against it. “I have something to tell you. It has been pushing at my heart for days now, and I have not had the privacy to discuss it.”

“What is the matter?” Joshua sat down on the bed.

“Mr. McLean proposed.”

“He WHAT?” Joshua’s mouth dropped open.

“Not only that…I have a story to tell.” Lance sat down and began to tell everything that had transposed between Mr. Mclean and himself, omitting the part having to do with Mr. Kirkpatrick and Mr. McLean’s interference in that matter.

“Well, first of all, I am not at all surprised that he would propose to YOU,” Joshua said. “You are
everything good and desirable in a mate.” Lance snorted. “But he did not go about it well, did he? Perhaps he is not used to paying compliments.”

“Perhaps he is not used to thinking of anyone but himself,” Lance interrupted.

“But Mr. Lambert! Who would have thought that he could be so bad? Perhaps he is simply misunderstood…”

“You cannot make them BOTH good, Joshua,” Lance said with a smile. “Mr. Lambert has deceived us all.”

“Poor young Kristopher McLean,” Joshua said with a sigh.

“Here is my question, Joshua…do I make this known about Mr. Lambert? Should our friends and acquaintances be made aware? They need to interact with him before the regiment leaves.”

“Well…I see no good in it,” Joshua said finally. “I am sure we will not be seeing much of him again. Why cause a storm when there is no need?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Lance said, thankful to get rid of the weight that had been heavy on his shoulders.
Chapter 13

Lance thought that he would be obsessed with Mr. McLean’s letter and the entire Lambert situation, but this was not to be so. One week at home passed, and then the regiment was to move out to Brighton. This obsession took over Lance’s home.

Justine and Nickolas moped around the house continuously, and Lance privately thought that if any of the soldiers could see the dejected handsome faces, they would be smitten. His brothers did not quietly mope, either; they proclaimed their depression to anyone who would listen. A chorus of their mother’s added commentary often backed this.

“Oh, what are we to do now?” Nickolas moaned at breakfast one morning. “There is nothing to brighten our days…not one reason to leave the house.”

“You COULD find something useful to do with your time,” Lance pointed out. “Read a book. Look at a newspaper.”

“I’m glad YOU can find something to joke about, Lance,” Justin growled.

“I remember when Colonel Miller’s regiment went away,” Lynn sighed, gazing off into space. “I believe I cried for two days.”

“I’VE cried for thrice that,” Justin declared.

“If we could but go to Brighton,” Lynn said. “If your father…”

“Papa has a very good reason to keep us here, I am sure,” Joshua said placidly.

“Our aunt says that sea bathing is very good for the body and mind,” Nickolas pointed out. “I’m sure we could all use THAT.”

“I have no more appetite.” Lance pushed back his chair, glared at his brothers, and left the room.

“Couldn’t you DO something, Mamma?” He heard Justin whine.

“Lord,” Lance muttered, escaping to his room. He gathered some books and went out into the garden to read. It was a sunny morning, and he liked the sounds of the birds and insects around him as he read. He was disturbed from his solitude about an hour later by two resounding shrieks coming from inside the house.

“NO! It cannot be!”

“I cannot believe it! Have you ever heard anything so wonderful?”

Lance sighed, put down his book, and wandered inside to find the cause of the commotion. His siblings and mother were in the library. Their father, wisely, was nowhere to be found. Nickolas was standing at the fireplace, head buried in his arms on the mantle. Justin and Lynn embraced, actually hopping up and down. Howard stood and stared at them, a frown on his face. Joshua stood and patted Nickolas’ back, watching Lynn and Justin. “What has happened?” Lance gasped.

“The most horrible thing ever!” Nickolas turned and glared at Justin, eyes red-rimmed. “I do not understand why YOU were asked and not me!”
“Because everyone likes me and NO ONE likes you.” Justin stuck his tongue out at his brother. “Lance, Mrs. Foster has written and asked me to come stay with her at Brighton. It isn’t MY fault she likes me above all other people, is it? She is young, and pretty, and popular, and what fun we shall have.” Justin clasped the letter in his hands and stared out the window. “I must see to my trunks…look at my clothing…Mamma, may I have something new?”

“Of course you shall, my boy!” Lynn shrilled with delight. “And if we cannot find what you like, you may always borrow something of your brother’s.”

“He most certainly may NOT!” Nickolas bellowed, as he was the only brother close to Justin in size.

“You can both relax,” Lance said quietly. “For Papa has not yet given his approval.”

“But he will. He MUST!” Justin said. “Come, Mamma, let us tell him immediately.”

“Yes, yes.” Lynn patted herself back into respectability and followed Justin from the room.

“He won’t say yes, Nickolas,” Lance assured his brother. “It will be all right.”

“I think…” Joshua began, but was interrupted by screams of delight emanating from their father’s study. “Oh, dear.”

Nickolas buried his face again on the mantle.

“Papa, may I speak with you?” Lance tapped on his father’s door and poked his head in at the same time.

“Of course, son.” Mr. Harless pushed aside the ledger he was reading over. “Come in and sit.”

Lance took a seat on the sofa by his father’s desk. “Papa, it is about Justin and this Brighton situation.”

“Yes…yes…”

Lance took a deep breath. “Please do not think that I am being presumptuous by questioning your decision to allow Justin to go…but do you really feel it is wise?”

“You’ve given this some thought.” Mr. Harless looked amused.

“Yes, Papa.” Lance rubbed his hands on his knees. “Papa, I know you are not blind to Justin’s behavior. He is completely inappropriate in public, and now you wish to send him off to keep company with people we hardly know, in a strange town. While I’m sure Mrs. Foster is friendly enough, do we know anything of her that would recommend her to be Justin’s chaperone? If Justin acts out as he does here, within sight of his family at all times, how can we think he will act without us?”

Mr. Harless sighed. “Lance…I appreciate what you are saying. But you know Justin will never be truly happy unless he is exposing himself in some public place or other. If he does it there, need we even hear of it? He will enjoy himself immensely, make a spectacle of himself, and then come home where we may keep an eye on him.”

“But…” Lance began, but was interrupted by the sound of the ledger being closed, and a sigh of relief. “Papa…if you were only aware of how his horrible manners reflect upon us all…I am sure you would feel completely different.”
“It sounds as if this has affected you personally,” Mr. Harless said shrewdly, eyeing his favorite son. “Has he frightened away a suitor of yours?”

“No, I do not take it personally in the manner you suggest,” Lance lied. “Papa…everything Justin does reflects upon Joshua and I, his eldest brothers, who are to set the example. It also reflects on you and Mama as his parents. If you do not begin to teach him the correct way to behave, the true ideas of propriety…it will be too late. For all the schooling he had, his head is as empty as a barn before harvest. His days are spent idly, with no attempts to better himself. He cares only about fashion, speaks only gossip. The only thing I’ve heard him sound remotely intelligent about is music…and even that is not enough to keep him occupied for long. Papa, I even heard him mention how he wished he could go upon the stage!” Lance exclaimed. “And to make everything worse, he will lead Nickolas on this empty path as well.”

“Lance…Lance…” Mr. Harless stood and came to sit by Lance. “Please do not vex yourself so. Wherever you and Joshua are known, you are respected and admired. Nothing Justin or Nickolas or Howard can do will change that. We will have absolutely no peace in this house if he does not go, and you know it. I’ve met Colonel Foster. He seems a sensible man, and we can trust him to keep an eye on our wayward lamb. Justin will be a very tiny fish in the larger pond of Brighton, and will be nothing but an amusement to those who meet him. Perhaps he might learn something.”

“If you believe so, Papa,” Lance sighed. He squeezed his father’s shoulder and left the study, deep in thought.

Later that week, Lance had his final encounter with Adam Lambert before the regiment was officially gone to Brighton. Lynn had insisted on having some of Nickolas and Justin’s favorites over for dinner, and Mr. Lambert was, of course, included in the party. Lance made it a point to make himself unavailable to Mr. Lambert, as he really was unsure as to what he could say. Even while engaged in conversation with others, Lance observed Mr. Lambert, noting a hint of falseness and prepared statements that he had not noticed before.

Finally he could not ignore the man any longer without seeming rude, so he allowed Mr. Lambert to take the seat next to him as Lynn served coffee. “I understand you were to visit your cousin and friend,” Mr. Lambert said, his blue eyes friendly. “How did you find the area?”

“My friend is well settled, and I could not be more pleased. Moreover, we were invited to dine at Rosings Park quite often,” Lance said. “And if that was not enough, Colonel Lachey and Mr. McLean were visiting as well.”

“Ah,” Mr. Lambert said, playing with his spoon. “Are you acquainted with Colonel Lachey, Mr. McLean’s cousin?” Lance asked innocently.

“Colonel Lachey? Yes,” Mr. Lambert answered. “I have seen him often. He is a very gentlemanlike man, from my memory. Did you find him thus?”

“Oh, yes. He and I often found ourselves seated near one another at dinner, and we had many chances to talk. He was a very charming man,” Lance replied.

“His manners are very different from his cousin’s.”

“True, but I found that Mr. McLean improves upon acquaintance,” Lance said. Mr. Lambert’s eyes widened but he said nothing. “After getting to know him a bit better, I find I understand him a bit
“I see.” Mr. Lambert stood and bowed. “Sir.” He went over to pay flattering attention to Lynn, and Lance smiled as he watched him walk away.

“Please write to me every day!” Justin exclaimed as he climbed up into the carriage. “Of course, I will not have time to write much to YOU, because I will be so very busy enjoying myself.”

“I hope your carriage flips over and you end up in a ditch,” Nickolas mumbled. For once, Lance did not correct him. Justin had been unbearable since the invitation had arrived, and this day had not come soon enough.

“Oh, do have a nice time, Justin! I cannot wait to hear of your adventures!” Lynn waved a handkerchief. “I shall miss you!”

“I will miss you, too, Mamma, when I have time! Goodbye!” Justin leaned out the window and waved as the carriage started away.

“I hope you understand more why I allowed him to go, Lance,” Mr. Harless said. “If I were to say no, and you went off with your aunt and uncle to the Lakes, I would go mad from the constant crying and complaining.”

“I am sorry to leave you, Papa, but you will have Joshua,” Lance reminded him. “And perhaps Justin will prove me wrong.”

“Come, Nickolas…come in and help me prepare some things for our cousins,” Joshua said, leading Nickolas towards the house.

“Fine…whatever you like…nothing matters,” Nickolas said dramatically.

Lance and Mr. Harless looked at each other. “Are you sure it was JUSTIN who mentioned going upon the stage?” Mr. Harless asked.

A few days later, James and Diane Bass arrived with their four children. The two boys and two girls were a boisterous lot, and they loved spending time with their cousin Joshua, whose creative mind and patient spirit made him an excellent caretaker. Lynn declared a headache almost immediately upon their arrival, and no one missed her when she went up to her bed.

“I have some sad news,” Diane said to Lance as Joshua herded the children out to the garden. “We will have to shorten our trip.”

“Why?”

“Your uncle has some pressing business that will not wait much longer than a month,” Diane answered. “We cannot go as far as the Lakes, but we can stop in Derbyshire, if that is agreeable to you. I know you will miss the beauty of the Lakes, but Derbyshire is a wonderful place. I spent years of my youth there.”

“Well…if it is not possible, then that is that,” Lance said, disappointed.

“Derbyshire has much to offer you, Lance,” Diane said. “It is where Adam Lambert passed his
youth…and is the location of Pemberly.”

“Yes,” Lance said faintly. “Of course, I will be pleased with whatever you decide, Aunt.”

They left the very next day, without the dramatics caused by Justin’s departure. Joshua was deeply engrossed with the children as soon as he came downstairs, and only Mr. Harless walked Lance out. “I shall miss you, Lance, but it is good for you to see some of the country while you’re young.”

“I will miss you as well, Papa. Please try to bear it well,” Lance teased, climbing into the carriage.

“Perhaps by the time you’re back, the house will be empty. Your mother will have succeeded in marrying off your brothers.”

“I do not hold my breath, Papa.” Lance gave a wave, and settled back in the carriage.

The first leg of the journey was a long one, and Mr. Bass dozed most of the time. Mrs. Bass and Lance chatted quietly, discussing what they hoped to see, and wondering if much had changed since Diane’s youth. “I think after we are settled in for a few days, we will go visit Pemberly,” Diane decided.

“I feel uncomfortable walking through someone else’s home, even if it is open to the public,” Lance told her.

“Well, I do not know that we go to see the interior…from what I remember, the grounds, woods and gardens are truly spectacular,” Diane said. “We can satisfy ourselves with those.”

“As long as we do not disturb the inhabitants of the house,” Lance said finally. The last thing he wanted was to give Mr. McLean another reason to think his family poorly mannered.

“The house is so large I doubt they would realize we were there,” Diane said with a laugh.

“If you and Uncle wish to go, I have no objections,” Lance said, and leaned back against the cushion.

When they arrived at the inn, the first thing Lance did was speak with the maid regarding Pemberly. “Oh, I’m quite familiar with the place, sir,” she said. “My younger brother is an undergardener there.”

“Do you know, are the family at home?”

“Oh, no, sir. They aren’t expected for at least a week. I know they are to bring a large party upon their return, but as far as I’ve heard, they aren’t at home.”

“Thank you,” Lance said, relieved.

The weather held up over the next few days, and they spent them exploring through the countryside. The land was rocky and held many beautiful views, and Lance grew tan and lean with all the exercise. After three days, he felt his was finally prepared to visit Mr. McLean’s home.

He’d hoped that his uncle would be satisfied wandering through the gardens and land, but he insisted on knocking at the front door. “We have it from the maid that the family is not at home, Lance. We will not be disturbing anyone,” James insisted. “The housekeeper is quite accustomed to visitors.”

“If you say so, Uncle,” Lance said, still feeling a bit uneasy.
The housekeeper, a jolly woman named Mrs. Reynolds, was more than happy to show them through her beloved home. She pointed out new additions as well as family heirlooms. When they turned into one end of the large hall, she pointed out two large portraits on the wall. “Mr. Kristopher, and Mr. Alexander,” she announced proudly.

Lance stared at the younger brother, an attractive man with a shy smile. “He is quite handsome.”

“Very,” the housekeeper agreed. “And such a sweet soul. If he had his way, he would be at the pianoforte morning, noon and night. He is quite accomplished.”

“And what of the elder brother, Lance?” Aunt Diane asked. “Does the portrait do him justice?”

“Oh, does the young man know my master?” Mrs. Reynolds asked in surprise.

“Yes, we have met,” Lance said briefly. He stared at the painting. The brothers shared the same dark eyes, but that was where the resemblance ended. Mr. McLean’s face wore a brooding expression.

“He is the best of masters, grown from the sweetest of boys,” Mrs. Reynolds told them. “He has much on his plate...Pemberly being such a large estate. He always manages to find time for his brother, though, and Mr. Kristopher thinks the world of Mr. Alexander.” She led the way out of the hall. “Come this way, please.”

Lance followed a bit behind, studying the decoration of the hallway. “I could have been master of all of this,” he mused quietly to himself. “Everything here could have belonged to me.”

“I’ll hand you over to Mr. Treevey now,” Mrs. Reynolds said. “He is the head gardener, and knows the land like the back of his hand.”

“Thank you so much,” Diane said to the woman. She nodded and returned to the house.

Lance continued to follow a bit behind his aunt and uncle, turning every now and then to look back at the large house. He sighed and quickened his step, as the others had disappeared into a small wooded glen to the south of the house. A figure stepped from the trees, and Lance stopped short.

“Oh,” he exclaimed. “I…I…”

“Lance!” Alexander McLean said in surprise. He wore a casual grey shirt, black pants, and no jacket. “I am surprised to see you.”

“And I you,” Lance said, his cheeks a flaming red.

“How have you been? Are you here on holiday?”

“Yes…I am,” Lance stammered.

“Your family,” Mr. McLean stated. “I mean to say, your family is well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Lance, where are you?” He heard his aunt call as the others retraced their steps to find him.

“Mr. McLean!” Mr. Treevey bowed. “We were not expecting you so soon.”

“I decided to ride ahead of the others, Treevey,” Mr. McLean said. Lance saw his aunt’s eyes widen as she realized who this man was. He stared at Lance for a moment, then said, “If you’ll excuse me.” He gave a curt bow and hurried towards the house with long strides.
“Well, he is a handsome man indeed,” Mrs. Bass said, twining her arm through Lance’s. Mr. Treevey led Mr. Bass down to the lake.

“Yes,” Lance said faintly. He was shocked by the eager greeting he’d received. It was nothing like Mr. McLean’s normally cold demeanor. He found himself wishing they’d been able to speak a bit longer.

“Are you all right?” Diane stopped walking and looked in Lance’s eyes. “Are you feeling the heat? Your face is red.”

“No, I am fine,” Lance promised. “Let us catch up to Uncle before he decides to wade in to catch the fish.”

They met Mr. Bass and Mr. Treevey at the lake, where they spent about twenty minutes before Mrs. Bass declared she was feeling fatigued. They slowly made their way back to the drive, and were astonished to once again meet with Mr. McLean. He was now dressed more appropriately, in a light green jacket and pants, cravat perfectly bound.

“Here we are again,” he said, bowing to Lance.

“I was not able to tell you much I admire your home,” Lance said, determined to start the conversation. “It is truly breathtaking. Delightful.”

“I am glad you like it,” he said softly. He looked over Lance’s shoulder. “May I have the honor of being introduced to your friends?”

“Of course. Forgive me,” Lance colored again, and moved to bring his aunt and uncle forward. “Aunt, Uncle, this is the owner of Pemberly, Mr. Alexander McLean. Mr. McLean, my aunt and uncle Bass.”

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance.” Mr. McLean gave a genuine warm smile, and Lance felt his stomach flutter a bit. “Are you from the area?”

“No,” Mr. Bass said. “My business keeps me to London, I’m afraid. My wife spent a time of her youth here, so we came to relive her old memories.”

“It is always like coming home when I come to Derbyshire,” Diane told him.

“It is a very welcoming place to call home,” Mr. McLean agreed. He led the way down the path a bit. “Mr. Bass, I noticed you talking to Mr. Treevey at the water’s edge…if you enjoy fishing, please come back any time during your stay. He will provide you with equipment.”

“I thank you, sir,” Mr. Bass said. “I do not get to do it as often as I’d like.”

“I thought you said he was cold and proud,” Mrs. Bass whispered to Lance. Lance could only shrug. Mr. McLean then turned to her, and began to speak to her of some of the old buildings in the village that she was most likely familiar with. Lance watched them, trying to sort through the confusion in his heart. One thought was prevalent: at least these were two members of his family who would not embarrass him in front of Mr. McLean.

They slowly made the turn back towards the drive. Mrs. Bass took her husband’s arm, and led him a bit ahead of the others. Lance and Mr. McLean walked side-by-side in silence, then Lance said, “I must have you know, sir, that we were assured of your absence by your housekeeper as well as staff in the village. We never would have trespassed…”
“It is no trespass,” he interrupted. “No one knew of my decision to ride home ahead of the others. It was a last moment decision, to be honest. I have business to attend to here, and it is much easier to take care of without a group of strangers roaming about your home.” He paused. “The rest will join me tomorrow, and among them are some you will know…Mr. Kirkpatrick and his sisters.” Lance nodded and said nothing. “There…there is one other person in the party who wishes to be known to you. Will you allow me…if it is not too much to ask…to introduce my brother to you during your stay here?”

Lance felt his mouth fall open, and quickly snapped it shut. He could not help but feel flattered. He knew of the close relationship between the brothers, and if Mr. McLean wanted Lance to meet Kristopher, that meant he still valued Lance as something more than an acquaintance. “I would like that very much,” Lance said. When they reached the house again, Mr. McLean asked them all to come in for refreshments, but they declined. He handed Mrs. Bass into the carriage, bowed to the men, and started inside.

“Well!” Mrs. Bass exclaimed as soon as they were on the road again.

“He was very kind, completely unassuming,” her husband said.

“He is not as handsome as Lambert, Lance, but there is something about his eyes,” Mrs. Bass said. “I still do not understand your dislike of him.”

“I assure you, Aunt, his behavior today was nothing like I have ever seen,” Lance said earnestly. “Truly, he was the gentleman in every way.”

“I find it hard to believe that he has behaved towards Lambert,” Mrs. Bass continued. “He does not look like the person who would make such a decision to change a young man’s life.”

“From what I have heard recently, Aunt, things may not be as we believe,” Lance said after a moment’s thought. “Lambert’s story may not be completely true.”

“It is a dramatic situation,” Mr. Bass declared, shaking his head.

“Look, dear, that is where I used to pick apples,” Mrs. Bass said, suddenly, pointing out the window. Her husband leaned forward, and Lance was permitted to fall back into his own thoughts.
Chapter 14

FOURTEEN

Lance knew that Kristopher McLean and the others were expected at Pemberly the next day, a Wednesday. He supposed that the brothers would not call until the following day. He was bound and determined, no matter what his aunt and uncle decided, to stay at the inn all Thursday morning until the visitors arrived.

Therefore, he was quite surprised late Wednesday morning when a curricle stopped in front of the inn and two men stepped out. “They have arrived,” he said, astonished.

“Who?” His aunt asked. “Not the McLeans.”

“Yes, Aunt,” Lance said. He smoothed down his hair and paced a bit before taking a seat on the settee.

“Mr. McLean and Mr. Kristopher McLean,” the maid announced. She curtsied and left the room, closing the door.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bass, what a pleasure to see you again,” Mr. McLean said, bowing. “And Lance. Good morning. Might I present to you my brother, Kristopher?”


“It is an honor to meet you all,” Kristopher said quietly. “I hope we do not impose on you, calling as we have unannounced.”

“We were simply sitting here and planning our day,” Diane Bass assured him. “Please sit down.”

The brothers sat on chairs near Lance. “I hear you are quite a musician, Mr. McLean,” Lance said to Kristopher.

“Please, if you will, call me Kristopher,” the man said shyly. “Yes, I do love music. I’ve had lessons on the pianoforte, and am hoping to start learning the harp.”

“Such a beautiful instrument,” Lance agreed.

“My brother says it is folly, but I believe I shall win the lessons in the end,” he confided with a small smile.

Lance looked at Alexander McLean, who was smiling proudly at his brother. “I believe you are correct,” Lance said in a loud whisper, and Kristopher actually giggled.

“My brother says you are one of five…is that correct?”

“Yes…I am the second of five brothers.”

“I would like to have younger brothers,” Kristopher said wistfully.

“Trust me, you would not. I have three. One of them has his nose in a book day and night, and still can find nothing of interest to discuss. The younger two…” Lance dramatically rolled his eyes. “There are times I am surprised our home is still standing.”
“Tell me more, please,” Kristopher said eagerly. Lance did as asked, telling a few stories of some of Nickolas and Justin’s wilder antics.

Mr. McLean moved to stand by the window, and after about fifteen minutes, he said, “Forgive my interruption, Lance, but there is someone else who has come to see you.”

The maid was unable to make the announcement before Christopher Kirkpatrick burst into the room. “Lance! So wonderful to see you again!”

“And you, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Lance said truthfully, because he had always liked the man. “How are you?”

“Wonderful, especially now that I make your acquaintance once again!” Christopher beamed at him. “How are you brothers and your family?”

“They are well, sir. Speaking of family, may I introduce my aunt and uncle Bass?”

“Delighted, ma’am. Sir.” Mr. Kirkpatrick gave a bow and a friendly smile.

“Please, sit.” Lance motioned to the seat next to Kristopher, assuming that Mr. Kirkpatrick would want to sit there. Instead, he took the seat next to Lance, and began to speak of their time at Netherfield.

“It is so long since I’ve had the pleasure of seeing you,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. “Since the ball at Netherfield, I am certain.”

“True,” Lance agreed. Mr. Kirkpatrick went on about different people in town, asking questions and relating fond memories. Lance looked for some sort of connection between Mr. Kirkpatrick and Kristopher, but could find none.

The visitors stayed for another half-hour, but then regretfully rose. Kristopher exchanged glances with his brother, who nodded. “Lance, my brother and I would wish very much to have you and your party to our home for dinner tomorrow.”

“Yes, please,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said eagerly. “There is much more I would like to converse with you about.”

Lance looked at his aunt, who gave a slight nod. “We would enjoy that very much,” Lance said. “Thank you.”

“Until tomorrow, then.” Bows were made by the visiting gentlemen, and then they left.

“What a charming young man!” Mrs. Bass exclaimed as soon as the carriage was on its way. “Such manners. I have heard the townsfolk mention that he is cold and proud, but I believe it is shyness and an honest modesty.”

“I agree,” Mr. Bass said. “And wasn’t Mr. Kirkpatrick a jolly fellow!”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick has always been a model of kindness and felicity,” Lance agreed. “And Kristopher McLean is the very picture of a gentleman.”

“You know, I wonder that we ought not wait until tomorrow to visit Pemberley,” Mrs. Bass said suddenly. “They came here almost immediately after their arrival…we should wait on them tomorrow morning.”
“I…I think that wise,” Lance said, smiling before he could stop himself.

“I will be gone early to fish there,” Mr. Bass said. “I will meet you later.”

When Mrs. Bass and Lance arrived at Pemberly the next morning, they were led to the saloon, where Kristopher, Molly and Kate were waiting. Molly and Kate greeted them only with a short curtsey, but Kristopher smiled and offered them coffee before asking them to sit.

“It is good of you to call,” he offered shyly. “I do not often receive visitors here, so I hope I am hospitable enough.”

“The manners of society are always a trial to learn,” Mrs. Bass said. “You perform them remarkably well.”

“Perhaps we could hear you play on the pianoforte?” Lance suggested, wondering of Kristopher might be more at ease behind an instrument.

He immediately colored and looked at the others. “Oh, no, I couldn’t,” Kristopher answered quickly. “I…I have nothing prepared.” Mrs. Bass and Lance quickly assured him that they did not expect anything complex, but he still refused. “Perhaps YOU could sing or play, Lance.”

“Oh, no!” Lance exclaimed immediately. “I have had next to no training in either. I would not embarrass myself.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, with Kate and Molly apparently refusing to engage in conversation. “Are…are any of your brothers musical?” Kristopher asked finally. He turned to Molly. “Lance was telling me about his brothers. He comes from a large family.”

“Yes, we know,” Molly said sharply. “We’ve been introduced.”

Lance stared at her and frowned before turning back to Kristopher. “My youngest brother, Justin, LOVES music. He also had quite the flare for the dramatic. My eldest brother, Joshua, is accomplished in all things artistic. He paints, he writes poetry, he dances, he sings. I am quite envious.”

“He sounds very talented,” Kristopher replied.

“I’m afraid I have not inherited half of that talent,” Lance told him. “I suppose my talent is for learning, as I greatly enjoy reading.”

“I do not read as much as I should,” Kristopher admitted. “Alexander has repeatedly encouraged me to take advantage of our library, but I have failed him.”

“If you’d like, I could suggest some things to you that wouldn’t be too heavy,” Lance offered. “I know what young men like to read, or at least what I THINK they would like to read.”

“I would appreciate that. Thank you,” Kristopher said with a beaming smile.

Mr. McLean entered the room with a bow. “Good morning, Mrs. Bass, Lance. I saw Mr. Bass down by the lake and he informed me of your visit.”

“I hope we do not disturb you,” Mrs. Bass said.

“Not at all,” Mr. McLean said. He poured himself some coffee and sat in a chair near Lance. Molly
frowned, as she’d been saving the seat nearest herself in the hopes he would sit there.

“So, Lance…are not the militia now removed from Meryton?” Molly asked. “That must be a great loss to YOUR family.”

Mr. McLean looked up sharply, and Kristopher’s face turned red, then pale white. Lance knew they immediately thought of Adam Lambert, as he himself did. It was obvious Molly knew nothing of the affair. “Any diversion lost is great indeed, in our small part of the world,” Lance said finally. “My younger brothers are quite easily distracted by anything new. I believe, however, that we shall endure.”

Relief washed over Mr. McLean’s face, and he gave Lance a very grateful smile. He began to speak with Mrs. Bass, and gradually drew Lance into the conversation as well. Kristopher seemed almost distraught, and did not add any more to the topic.

After another twenty minutes or so, Mrs. Bass and Lance excused themselves, and went to collect Mr. Bass. Kristopher went up to his room.

“Well, I am glad THAT visit is over,” Molly droned, draping herself artfully on the settee. “I did not expect to deal with THAT so early in the day.”

“I think it was very honorable of them to return our visit,” Mr. McLean said. He stared down into his cup.

“I feel that Lance has aged a bit, don’t you?” Molly asked. “And not in a good way. There is a tightness about the eyes…”

“He has spent many days out in the sun while on his holiday,” Mr. McLean pointed out. “It is certain that the sun would harden the skin a bit.”

“Definitely not the boy we met months ago,” she said, shaking her head.

“No.” Mr. McLean stood and put his cup to the side. “He has much improved with time, I feel.” He left the room, leaving Molly with her mouth agape.

Lance was disappointed that he’d not hear from Joshua in the few days he’d been away. When he finally received two envelopes together, he saw that the first had been misdirected by the post. While Joshua was artistic in many things, his handwriting left much to be desired. The first letter was a chatty message, telling of parties and gossip in their small town. The first half was upbeat and cheerful, but the second half made Lance sit down hard.

“Since writing the above, brother Lance, something has happened that I can hardly settle myself to write about. Firstly, please know that we are all safe and well. What I have to speak of involves Justin. An express came last night as we were just gone to bed. It was from Colonel Forster, informing us that Justin had gone off to Scotland with one of the officers…with Adam Lambert! As you can imagine, we were all quite shocked, although Nickolas seemed to know something of the plot. I am deeply sorry, as I feel this was a rash decision on both their parts, but perhaps their attachment was just too intense to ignore. We now await Colonel Foster himself, as he wrote that he would call on us immediately. Justin wrote Mrs. Foster a few lines, letting her know what was happening. I must go; as you can imagine, our mother needs me.”

Thus ended the first letter, and Lance’s hands shook as he opened the second envelope.
“By this time, my dear brother, you have received my first letter. I hope that I have calmed a bit, and that you may read this one easier. I doubt it, though, because I do not know where to start or what to stay. This news cannot be held any longer: we fear Mr. Lambert and Justin are NOT in Scotland, and they are NOT planning on marrying! Mr. Denny spoke with Colonel Foster, and let drop that Mr. Lambert never intended to go to Scotland, OR to marry Justin, no matter what Justin’s letter to Mrs. Foster said. Colonel Foster was very kind, and tried his best to remain positive during his visit, but as you can imagine, our parents think the worst. Mamma keeps to her room, and Papa paces the floor. Nickolas has been hiding away, as he knew something of their attachment and said nothing. I ask that you speak with our aunt and uncle, and return home as soon as possible. I know Papa plans to go to London with Colonel Foster to search for the couple, and uncle’s assistance would be greatly appreciated. “

Lance clenched the letters in his hands. “And my aunt and uncle choose NOW to tour the graveyard?” He groaned. He stood, then sat, his knees shaking too violently to hold him up.

The door swung open, and Lance eagerly looked for his uncle. Instead, he was surprised to see Mr. McLean. “Good morning, Lance, I…” Mr. McLean stared at him. “Good God, man, are you quite well?”

“I…I’m sorry, sir, I must find my uncle. It is a matter of some urgency.” Lance pulled himself to his feet again.

“I cannot allow it. You look as if you are ready to fall to the floor.” Mr. McLean gently gripped Lance’s arm. “Sit down. We will call a servant.”

“They are at the churchyard,” Lance said faintly, sitting back down. Mr. McLean darted out of the room, calling for a servant. He soon returned.

“Let me call someone to help you,” Mr. McLean said quietly. “Do you need medical attention? A glass of wine.”

“No, I thank you.” Lance managed a faint smile. “There is nothing the matter with me, exactly. I am quite well…as well as I could be…there is news from home.” Lance closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath. Mr. McLean sat by him on the sofa and said nothing. “I…I have just heard from Joshua…the most dreadful news. Justin has left Brighton, left everyone he knows…has eloped.” Mr. McLean’s eyebrows raised. “And he’s gone with Mr. Lambert. You can imagine the rest.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Yes.” Lance’s lips trembled. “I could have prevented this. I knew what he was, the monster he has shown himself to be, and I said nothing. Now…it is too late.”

“What has been done to find them?”

“My father is gone to London, and Joshua has written to ask my uncle to go as well. But nothing can be done. We know what kind of man we are dealing with. How will we even find them?”

Mr. McLean stood and began to pace. Lance watched him and felt his heart sink to his shoes. If there was any chance of Mr. McLean still having feelings for him, they would be quickly pushed aside by the truth of Justin’s betrayal. If Mr. McLean had worried about the association with Lance’s family before, now there would be no question of the shame.

At last he turned and said, “I believe you wish to be alone now, and I will leave you. Please know that I am sorry for you, and wish I could do something to assist you. I am sorry we will not be seeing
you at Pemberly for dinner.”

Lance stood. “Please convey my apologies to Kristopher. If you could simply tell him that family business calls us home immediately. I know…I know the truth cannot be concealed for long, but if you could do what you could.”

“Of course. Again, I am truly sorry. I hope everything turns out well for you.” He bowed deeply and gave Lance one last searching look before leaving.

Fifteen minutes after his departure, Mr. and Mrs. Bass came hurrying into the room. Lance explained the situation as quickly as he could, and Mr. Bass immediately left again to settle things with the innkeeper. Mrs. Bass insisted on pouring Lance a strong drink to calm his nerves before they went off to pack. “You are of a creative mind, Lance. I know the scenarios that are running across your brain at this moment. You must relax and hope for the best.”

“There is no hope at this moment, Aunt,” Lance said morosely, but he sipped at the beverage.

“Did we pass Mr. McLean on our way back?” Diane asked, and Lance nodded again. She studied him closely. “I assume he was here when you received the news?”

“He arrived shortly after I’d read the letter. He was solicitous and kind, but did not stay long. I am sure he did not wish to dirty his hands by any acquaintance with our family,” Lance said bitterly.

“Now, Lance,” Diane said. She gave him a long hug. “Finish that and let us pack. I’m sure your uncle will wish to be off shortly.”

Within the hour, they were in a carriage on their way home. Lance forced himself to relax; he realized his leg muscles were clenched, as if he were urging the horses on with his own body. “I will see you settled, my dear, and then I will follow Mr. Harless to town,” Mr. Bass told his wife.

“Lance, did you suspect ANY sort of attachment between the two of them?” Diane asked.

“No, Aunt. He treated Justin the same way he treated everyone else. Everyone in the militia saw Justin as some sort of pet, an amusement. Justin flirted and teased with everyone. He did not single Mr. Lambert out, and Mr. Lambert did not act particularly fond of Justin.” Lance sighed. “I do not believe love was involved in the slightest.”

“I cannot understand, then, what the reasoning was,” Mrs. Bass said.

“It is not money, for Justin is entitled to very little upon marriage. One can only assume that there was an intense…physical attraction,” Lance said, trying to keep things polite.

“Try to rest, Lance. We will be home as soon as possible.” Mrs. Bass patted Lance’s knee.

As soon as the carriage stopped moving, Lance jumped out. He did not even take time to stretch his cramped legs, but instead ran to the front door. It flung open as soon as he reached it. “Oh, Lance, I am SO glad to see you.” Joshua enveloped him in a tight embrace.

“And I you. How are you? You’ve been through so much here.” Lance ran a hand over his brother’s curls.

“Thankfully I’ve had these scoundrels to occupy me.” Joshua smiled fondly at their cousins, who were greeting their parents and asking for presents. “Mamma has taken to her bed, and I believe she
is almost enjoying the drama.”

“What a shock,” Lance said wryly. “And our father?”

“As I wrote, Papa went to London. He contacted us to give his lodgings and let us know he arrived safely, but other than that, no word.” Joshua linked his arm through Lance’s as they went inside. “I believe Mamma will rest better knowing Uncle is here, and that he will join Papa.”

“Oh, Justin…” Lance said with a sigh. “If only…”

“I know what you wish to say, Lance, and I will stop you,” Joshua said with a frown. “I believe that even if Justin knew the truth about Lambert, he would have gone anyway. The temptation would have been too great.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Lance said with a sigh.

“And we do not indeed know that they haven’t married,” Joshua said hopefully. “Perhaps Mr. Lambert has had a change of heart.”

“You think too well of everyone, Joshua,” Lance said, but he gave his brother a smile.

As Joshua said, Lance found his mother quite enjoying her bedridden state. “Oh, Lance, it is about time you’ve arrived. And where are your aunt and uncle?”

“They are downstairs seeing to their children, Mamma. They will be up directly,” Lance promised.

“Justin…Justin…to get married without consulting me! He will not know where to get the finest suit…or where to register the announcement!”

“Mamma…if they…when they get married, it will not be with an announcement and handsome suits,” Lance almost snapped. “Do you not see the shame of it all? We want to keep it as quiet as possible.”

“I am sure it is all a misunderstanding,” Lynn said. “Justin would not be so foolish.”

Lance looked at the floor and counted to ten. “Uncle will be up soon, Mamma.” He left the room before he could say something truly horrible.

Mr. Bass took enough to time to eat a small dinner before heading back out on the road to London. Lance could not eat, but sat with Nickolas, Howard, Joshua and his aunt while they ate. “Unhappy as this event is for Justin, we must draw from it the lesson that one false step could lean one on the path to ruin,” Howard said thoughtfully.

“Thank you, Howard,” Mrs. Bass said, giving Lance a small smile.

“Nickolas, I must ask.” Lance put down his fork and glared at his youngest brother. “WHAT of this did you know?”

Nickolas poked at his meat with his fork. “Nothing like this,” he said sullenly. “Everyone is angry with ME, and I’m not the one who ran away! I knew that Justin flirted with Mr. Lambert, and that he felt himself in love with him, but he surely said nothing to ME about eloping. It’s not my fault!”

“Of course it isn’t, dear.” Mrs. Bass patted his arm sympathetically.
Lance made it through dinner, then managed to draw Joshua upstairs where they could speak freely. “Tell me all, Joshua. What of Colonel Foster’s visit? What did he say?”

“He said he did suspect some sort of special friendship between them, especially on Justin’s side, but he didn’t feel it was anything serious. I feel quite sorry for him, for he took some of the blame upon himself. After all, this is one of HIS men, and Justin was a special friend of his wife.”

“Was Mr. Denny absolutely certain that Lambert did not wish to marry Justin?”

“Colonel Foster questioned Mr. Denny himself. He denied knowing anything, and would not truly give an opinion.”

“Did Colonel Foster give an opinion of Mr. Lambert?”

“Well…he did not speak so well of him as he might have thought before. He thought him flamboyant and extravagant…and apparently he left Meryton greatly in debt.”

“Oh, no.” Lance sat down on his bed.

“Here.” Joshua drew a letter from the desk. “This is the letter from Justin to Mrs. Foster. He allowed us to keep it.”

“My dear friend,” Lance read. “You will laugh when you know where I am gone. I am gone to Gretna-Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you simple. There is but one man in the world I love, and he is a dream come true. I shall never be happy without him, and here we are, off to become Mr. and Mrs. Adam Lambert! I shall send for my things as soon as we settle. I hope you will toast our happiness. Your affectionate friend, Justin Harless.”

“And that was all.” Joshua took the note back.

“Thoughtless Justin! What a letter to have written on such an important subject. It is obvious, however, that Justin truly believed they were off to marry,” Lance exclaimed.

“That is the hope we all cling to,” Joshua said, sitting down next to Lance on the bed.
Chapter 15

FIFTEEN

“Sweetness, why can’t we go out?” Justin whined as he stared out the window. “It’s a gorgeous day, and I want everyone to see my new suit.”

“Later,” a voice grumbled. “And get away from the window.”

“Why?” Justin turned around and frowned. “Are you afraid someone might want to steal me away?”

Adam Lambert pushed away the papers he’d been reading and forced a smile to his face. “That is exactly what I’m afraid of, my dear boy.” He leaned back, a tall handsome form wearing only a pair of unlaced breeches.

Justin’s face lit up and he hurried across the room. He stood behind Adam, allowing his hands to slide down Adam’s smooth chest. “I’m all yours. Forever.”

Adam allowed his eyes to flutter closed as the soft hands caressed his skin. “What a pleasant thought.”

Justin knelt behind his chair and began to kiss a line from Adam’s ear down to his shoulder. “I just want to show you off, love. I want everyone to know what a handsome man I’ve caught.” His hand slid lower.

“Not now.” Adam shrugged out of Justin’s embrace.

“What?”

“I have some things to do.” Adam turned back to his papers.

“You’ve had things to do ever since we got to town,” Justin snapped. He went back to the window, sticking his tongue out at the back of Adam’s head before looking out again.

“I know you’ve been spoiled and pampered, Justin, so let me explain this to you.” Adam slowly turned around, his voice low. “Things cost money. Your new suit. The food we eat. This miserable room. And now that I’ve left the militia, there is no money coming in. It’s not like YOU come with a large dowry.”

“You…you said all that didn’t matter.” Justin pouted, tears filling his blue eyes. “You said that all that mattered was the way we felt for one another.”

Adam sighed and stood up. He walked over to Justin and drew him away from the window. “You’re right. I did say that. And how we feel for one another is very important.” He kissed Justin, pressing tightly against him. Justin sighed, allowing his body to melt against Adam. Adam felt himself harden as they kissed. He pulled back and took Justin by the hand. “Allow me to show you exactly HOW I feel about you.” Adam slowly led Justin towards the bed.

An hour later, Justin lay with his head on Adam’s chest, a hand lazily stroking up and down Adam’s arm. “I wish I could have been there when my family received the news that we went away together.” He kissed Adam’s stomach. “Joshua and Lance will be pea GREEN with envy that I’ve
caught a husband before either of them.” He giggled a bit. “I can just imagine their faces.” Adam made a non-committal sound, stretching a bit. “Adam, dear, when ARE we going to get married?”

“Soon,” Adam promised. He kissed Justin’s forehead and slid from his embrace.

Two days later, the family received a letter from Mr. Bass. He’d located Mr. Harless, and convinced him to move to the Bass home in London while they searched. So far they had no news, but Mr. Bass mentioned he’d written to Colonel Foster, asking if Mr. Lambert had any friends or acquaintances in London that might be addressed.

The family lived in a constant state of anxiety, jumping to their feet whenever a carriage drove by, or when a horse seemed to stop at the house. Lynn kept to her room, occasionally wandering downstairs to morosely sit in a chair and stare at nothing. Howard busied himself with his religious studies, commenting now and then on their sad state of affairs. Joshua was a faithful servant to his mother, with Lance as an occasional substitute. Nickolas moped around the house, unsure what to do now that he could not follow Justin’s lead. Lance began to quietly suggest more appropriate uses of his time, such as reading the newspaper or discussing current events. He was surprised to find that underneath the shock of Nickolas’ blond hair there was a decent mind.

Nickolas was the one to answer the door when the next message came from their uncle. “Go fetch Mamma,” Lance ordered Howard. “She can come down here for this, at least.”

“Lance,” Joshua said reprovingly. Lance had very little patience for their overemotional mother.

“Is it my boy? Is he married?” Lynn came fluttering down the steps.

“Read it, Nickolas,” Lance said.

Nickolas tore the envelope. “My dear family…unfortunately, we have no news of the whereabouts of the wayward couple, though I do have information regarding Mr. Lambert. I have heard from Colonel Foster, and the news is not good. Mr. Lambert does not seem to have any close acquaintances that he continues to seek out. We have found no one to question, and therefore our trail runs colder by the moment. While in Brighton, as well as at home, Mr. Lambert acquired a considerable amount of gambling debts. Colonel Foster figures more than a thousand pounds would be required to cover his expenses in Brighton alone.”

“A thousand pounds?” Joshua gasped.

“In Brighton alone,” Lance repeated.

“The one piece of good news I have for you is that your father is on his way home,” Nickolas continued reading. “He is much downhearted at our failure to find any information, and I have convinced him that his place is at home with his family. I promised him that I will do everything in my power to find them, and that I will contact you all the moment I know something. Your obedient uncle and brother, James Bass.”

“Now that your father is returning, I will gather the children and go back home,” Diane Bass said. “You no longer need me here.”

“Aunt, your presence is always soothing,” Lance told her, kissing her cheek. “But I know the children are eager to return home.”

“Gambling debts…debts of honor…poor Justin,” Lynn wailed, slowly plodding up the stairs. Lance
rolled his eyes. Joshua sighed and followed his mother, offering her tea.

Lance went out to the garden and sat on a bench. Their entire lives were in an uproar, and it seemed that nothing could possibly make things right. Even if Lambert DID marry Justin, the blight against their family remained. Mr. Kirkpatrick…Mr. McLean…they were far out of reach now. They would be lucky to find an old widower to marry them.

Mr. Harless returned late the next morning. He greeted each of his sons with a hearty handshake, and went to announce his arrival to his wife. He then shut himself in his study, and did not come back out until dinner. Lynn was still taking her meals upstairs, and no one wished to bring up the unhappy topic. Dinner was a quiet affair.

Mr. Harless returned to his study, and Lance followed him. “May I have a word, Papa?”

“Of course, son. I know what you wish to discuss.” Mr. Harless pointed to a chair, then closed the door.

“I cannot even imagine what you’ve gone through, Papa,” Lance said softly. “I wish I could have been here for you.”

“It would not have made a difference, but thank you all the same,” Mr. Harless said. “And to be truthful, did I not bring this on myself?”

“Do not be so severe on yourself.”

“It must be done,” Mr. Harless said simply.

“There was no sight of them in London?” Lance asked, sighing.

“None that I could find,” Mr. Harless answered dourly. “However, your uncle is much more familiar with the town and all its haunts. Perhaps he will have luck where I could not.”

“I’m sure things will turn out all right in the end, Papa.” Lance stood.

“I’m not sure how, Lance, but you hold on to that hope.” Mr. Harless jerked his head towards the door, dismissing him.

Two days after their father’s return, Joshua and Lance were working in the garden. Nickolas came barreling out of the house. “Papa has received an express from our uncle!”

Joshua dropped his shears and they landed point down in the damp ground. “What?”

“Yes,” Nickolas panted. “He took it and has shut himself in his study.”

“Well, we will have to wait for him to come out, then,” Lance said, trying to keep his composure.

“He’s been there over an hour,” Nickolas said. “Lance, you go talk to him. He likes you best.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lance lied, but he removed his gloves and brushed dirt from his pants. “Come with me, Joshua.”

They returned to the house and Lance knocked on his father’s door. “Papa? It is Lance and Joshua.”
“Enter,” Mr. Harless said.

“You’ve heard from my uncle?” Joshua asked almost breathlessly.

“Yes, I have a letter from him.”

“Good news or bad?” Lance sat down across from his father with Joshua at his side.

“I never expected any good news,” his father replied. “But you read it.”

Lance grabbed the letter. “My dear brother,” he read. “I am finally able to send news of my nephew. Soon after you left, I was able to find out what neighborhood they’ve been in all this time. I have seen them both. They are not married, and I do not find any intention of them being so. If you are willing to perform the duties I have ventured to suggest on your side, I believe it will not be long before they are wed.”

“I knew it!” Joshua clapped his hands together. “Our uncle is a genius.”

“You must simply assure Justin his equal share of the estate upon your demise, and also give him one hundred pounds per annum during your life. It seems that Mr. Lambert’s circumstances are not as hopeless as we originally thought. If you will send me full approval to act in your name, we will draw this situation to a close. I hope you will agree that Justin should be married from this house. Write immediately.”

“Is it actually possible?” Lance asked. “Mr. Lambert WILL marry Justin?” Mr. Harless gave a noncommittal shrug. “You must answer this immediately, Papa!”

“I will write it for you, “Joshua suggested.

“No, it is my duty. There are two things I cannot push from my mind, however. How much money did your uncle lay down to bring this all about…and how will I EVER repay him?”

“What do you mean, Papa?” Joshua asked.

“No man in his senses would choose JUSTIN on so slight an amount as one hundred a year during my life and fifty after I am gone.”

“That is true,” Lance said slowly. “He still has many debts to repay. I’m sure the sum our kind uncle turned over was NOT small.”

“Lambert is a fool if he accepts Justin for less than ten thousand pounds,” Mr. Harless said, and his sons gasped. “Well, I must sit down and write this letter. Go tell your mother the news…I’m sure she’ll find something in it to be thankful for.”

“Yes, Papa,” Lance said soberly. They left the study and went upstairs.

As expected, Lynn was excited for all the wrong reasons. “Married! My youngest! But from London? He should be married HERE! I need to supervise the luncheon and the clothing and everything!”

“Mamma…that is not at all appropriate,” Lance said. “There is no way Justin could come here and have a normal wedding. Not after what he’s done.”

“I don’t see why not,” Lynn snapped, then sighed. “If it is to be that way, I cannot change it.” She struggled to get out of bed. “I will go see my sister and tell her the good news.”
Mr. Bass soon wrote to his brother again, regarding Mr. Lambert’s future plans. It was decided that Mr. Lambert would quit the home militia, and join the regular army. A position was located for him in a northern regiment, and Mr. Lambert was eager to join his comrades there. “I have written to Colonel Foster and asked that he take care of Mr. Lambert’s debts in Brighton. Of course I will reimburse him. I will take care of everything here. Brother, if you could supply a list of all creditors in Meryton and the area, I would appreciate it greatly. Everything should be completed quickly. They will then join his regiment, unless you will allow a visit from them first. Justin eagerly wishes to see his mother and brothers.”

“What do you mean, they will move to the North!” Lynn cried when the letter was read to her. “So far away! We may never see Justin again!”

“You must understand that they cannot stay here, Mamma,” Joshua reminded her in his quiet way. “It cannot be done.”

“Poor Justin,” Lynn moaned. “Sent away from his loving family.”

Lance had many things he wished to say on the topic, but bit his tongue. “You will allow them to visit, Papa?”

“Of course,” Mr. Harless grunted. “Your mother will not rest before she can show off her married son.”

“Oh, Mr. Harless!” Lynn crowed, falling on her husband and kissing him. He rolled his eyes and removed himself from her embrace as quickly as possible.

“We must be kind to him,” Joshua said to his brothers, staring at Lance in particular. “Justin has been through a difficult time.”

“HE’S been through a difficult time!” Nickolas exclaimed. “I had to sit here and have you all blame ME for his indiscretions!”

“Joshua, your problem is that you believe Justin to have the morals and strength of character that YOU do,” Lance said. “If you were in his shoes, you would be properly mortified, and would beg for our forgiveness.” He paused. “Then again, you wouldn’t be in his shoes in the first place. At any rate, Justin is enjoying this immensely, I assure you. He loves attention.”

“I still believe we should be understanding,” Joshua insisted. “And we must welcome our new brother with open arms.”

Nickolas snorted, and Lance could only agree with him. “I’m sure he’d love nothing more,” Lance said, rolling his eyes.

They heard carriage wheels, and then Justin’s voice. Their mother’s shrieks of joy were loud, and Lance winced from two rooms away. The parlor door opened, and there stood Adam Lambert. “Dear brothers!” He shook hands all around, saving Lance for last. “How wonderful to see you all!”

“Mr. Lambert,” Joshua murmured, as they all bowed.
“Nonsense! What is this “Mr. Lambert”? We’re family now, and you must call me Adam.” Adam beamed at them all. “You all look so well. I couldn’t be happier to see you.”

“Where is your husband?” Lance asked innocently.

“He is in the arms of your mother, and I fear I might not see him again.” Adam removed his hat and sat down. “Your father greeted us, but apparently he had urgent business to attend to, and left for his study.”

Probably working out how to pay off all your debts, Lance thought to himself. “Yes, he’s had many things to occupy his time,” he said out loud.

“Where is everyone?” Justin burst into the parlor. “Here you are! Sitting and visiting with my husband!” Justin bestowed hugs all around, then fell onto Adam’s lap. “Isn’t that the strangest sound? My husband!” He lay his curly head on Adam’s shoulder. “And I daresay I’ve caught a more handsome husband than any of you ever will.”

“Now, Justin, there is no need to boast,” Adam said, actually blushing.

“I think there is every need! I left here a boy, and now I am married!” Justin jumped to his feet. “Mamma, does everyone know I’m married today? I’d hoped we’d meet more people we knew on the way back, but alas, we did not.”

“Mamma spread the word,” Nickolas said simply.

“I cannot wait to go see Britney’s family, and our aunt, and to show off my charming husband!” Justin gushed.

“Excuse me,” Lance said, leaving the room. Joshua quickly followed him, cornering him in the hallway.

“Are you ill?”

“Almost,” Lance said. He leaned against the wall. “Do you see what I mean, now, Joshua? He has no shame. He is not the slightest bit embarrassed by all of this. He is PROUD! And that man…our BROTHER. He’s quite pleased with his situation.”

“Now, Lance…”

“It is quite obvious, Joshua, that there is much more love on one side of that marriage than the other. If it weren’t for Mr. Lambert’s dire circumstances, I assure you that it NEVER would have happened.”

“Come back,” Joshua begged, tugging at Lance’s sleeve. “We will soon sit down to dinner, and it will not look right if you are not at the table.”

“I suppose,” Lance said with a sigh. “But if it gets to be too much, I WILL leave the table.”

“Oh, Justin, do you really need to go so far away?” Lynn asked, patting her son’s hand.

“I’m afraid so, ma’am,” Adam answered. “I am to join my regiment at the end of the fortnight, and that is where we are stationed.”

“I am sure I will miss you so,” Lynn moaned.
“I believe I shall like it more than anything,” Justin announced. “What a new and unknown landscape! You, papa, my brothers...you must all come visit. I dare say there will be balls and dinners, and they will not want for partners. And when you and papa return, leave a few of my brothers with me...I will have husbands for them before the year is out!”

“I thank you, but I do not particularly like your way of getting husbands,” Lance said quietly. Nickolas hid a smile in his napkin, Joshua glared at him, but Justin seemed not to hear.

“We will need to shop a bit, my love,” Justin said to Adam. “A few things for our journey.”

“Whatever you wish,” Adam said, finishing his glass of wine.

Lynn insisted on giving Justin some extra spending money, and the five brothers went together to town. Justin flashed a saucy grin at everyone they met, speaking loudly about his recent nuptials, and lamenting that his husband had opted to remain at home while they shopped. Justin and Nickolas gaily entered shop after shop, almost as if the events of the past few weeks had never happened.

“Some things never change,” Joshua said with a sigh, watching Justin tie a cravat about Nickolas’ throat.

“It should be you,” Lance said, frowning. “He should not be the first to do anything in this family. He is completely undeserving.”

“I believe Joshua will get what he deserves,” Howard said suddenly, and the older boys turned to look at him. “Tis true. Patience and virtue always wins in the end.”

“I can only hope so,” Lance said. “You are right, Howard. No one deserves it more.” Joshua blushed and turned away.

Justin’s purchases were piled into a cart and sent ahead. The family slowly made its way down the dusty road towards the house.

“Lance, you didn’t hear the details of my wedding,” Justin suddenly realized. “You were not in the room when I told everyone!”

“I do not think we need to speak more of it,” Lance began, but Justin waved him off.

“You never want us to speak of important things. Aunt, Uncle and I were up early, though I could hardly eat a bite! I could not wait to see my handsome Lambert at the altar. We were just about to step into the carriage when Uncle was called away by his business steward! I was all nerves, because I knew we’d be late, and once Uncle starts discussing business, there is no retrieving him. He was to give me away, of course, and without him, we could not proceed! Thankfully, he was gone but fifteen minutes. Later, after everything was done and I’d gathered my wits, I realized that the wedding would have continued, for Mr. McLean would have done just as well.”

Lance stopped walking. “Mr. McLean?”

“Oh yes...he was to bring Lambert and...oh dear.” Justin stopped walking as well, the smile falling from his face for the first time since his arrival. “I forgot. I was not to breathe a WORD of it. I promised Lambert, too! It was to be a secret...please do not say anything, any of you.”

“Of course,” Joshua said immediately. “We will not say another word about it.”
“Of course not,” Lance murmured, although his insides were fairly bursting.

He slowly followed behind the others. Mr. McLean at Justin’s wedding! He could not imagine what reason there could have been for Mr. McLean to be at Adam Lambert’s wedding, the person he hated most in the world. He most surely had no fondness for Justin.

As soon as they reached the house, Lance hurried to his room and began a letter to his aunt. “You can only imagine my curiosity regarding this matter,” he wrote. “A stranger to our family, in the midst of such an intimate moment encircled in such an embarrassing situation. Please, write immediately and explain, if you can.”
Chapter 16

SIXTEEN

Lance received a response from his aunt so quickly that he assumed she had sat down to write immediately upon receiving his request for information. When the letter was handed to him, he snatched it up and fled the room without explanation. He hurried out into the garden and sat down under a small tree.

“My dear nephew… I have just received your letter, and have cleared my entire morning to devote myself to its response. I must admit I did not expect such a message from you, as I assumed the matter to be quite secret. I should have known… we are speaking of Justin, after all.

“On the day I arrived back from your home, your uncle received an unexpected visitor: Mr. McLean. They shut up in Uncle’s study for hours before my arrival, apparently, so all was done by the time I arrived. Mr. McLean told your uncle that he’d found Justin and Mr. Lambert, and knew the exact location of their temporary home. He had even spoken with them. From what I could gather, Mr. McLean left Derbyshire only one day after we did, and came to town for the explicit purpose of hunting for them. He said that he’d known Mr. Lambert’s true colors all along, and it was because of his own selfish pride that Justin was in such a predicament. If he’d come clean in public about Mr. Lambert’s history, it could have been prevented. What this history is, I am not certain.

“There is a lady named Mrs. Younge who apparently was governess to Mr. McLean’s brother at one time. As Mr. McLean knew that Mrs. Younge was acquainted with Mr. Lambert, he went to her for information. At first she declined, but Mr. McLean finally convinced her to give him the address. He tried to convince Justin to leave Mr. Lambert and return home, but he would have none of it. He confessed his devotion to Mr. Lambert and would not leave him. Mr. Lambert did not give the impression that he was planning to marry Justin; he instead hoped to find greener pastures in another location. Mr. McLean finally convinced him, and they agreed to be married.

“Your uncle’s part in this is not what he would have wished. As you know, the money involved in this situation is an outstanding amount, and it is an amount that Mr. McLean insisted on paying. He said it was the only way he could absolve his guilt for not making Mr. Lambert’s true person known. He made us vow not to tell anyone of his involvement.”

Lance stared at the sky, not truly seeing it. Mr. McLean found Justin and Lambert, persuaded Lambert to marry Justin. Mr. McLean paid off Lambert’s debts. But WHY? Not for love of Lambert, and not for any particular attachment to Justin. A small part of Lance’s heart thought perhaps it was for him, but he knew that there was no way Mr. McLean would want him now. Not when claiming Lance meant claiming Adam Lambert as a brother-in-law.

And why would Alexander McLean still want Lance? Lance had snapped at him, belittled him, showed him every ill-manner possible. Lance wished with all his heart now that he could take it back, because it was completely undeserved. Mr. McLean was most certainly one of the best men Lance had ever known.

“Oh, Justin… when shall we meet again?” Lynn wailed, hugging Justin one last time before the couple stepped into their carriage.

“Lord, I don’t know. Perhaps not these next few years!” Justin said cheerfully. “But you may write
to me. I don’t know if I’ll write back…I’m sure I will be far too busy. The rest of you will have nothing to do, however, so YOU may write ME.”

“I thank you all for your kind welcome to the family,” Adam said. He shook hands all around and kissed Lynn’s cheek. He looked at Lance, however, when he said, “I could not possibly ask for better brothers.”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Harless grumbled. “Well, my boy, take care.” He gave Justin a brief hug. “Try to stay out of trouble.”

“Oh, I will, Papa,” Justin promised. Lance couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “Goodbye, now!”

“Oh, Justin,” Lynn said, sobbing into her handkerchief.

“Farewell!” Adam called, leaning out of the window to wave one last time.

Lynn managed to wind down to an occasional snuffle as the carriage lurched into motion. “My baby…”

“It will be all right, Mamma,” Nickolas said, patting her shoulder. “You have all of us.”

“Yes. Of course.” But Lynn did not look at all comforted.

What did change her mood was the news that the housekeeper at Netherfield had received orders to prepare for the arrival of her master, who was coming to shoot for several weeks. Any arrival to the neighborhood was fodder for gossip, but this particular arrival seemed a bit more personal.

“Not that we CARE when he comes, mind you,” Lynn said to her sister when she came to visit. “He is just another man…a man who played my Joshua quite ill. However, I suppose he is entitled to come to his own home and shoot his own game.”

“I’m sure he would appreciate your allowing that, Mamma,” Lance teased.

“Lance,” Joshua hissed.

“My pretty boy,” Lynn sighed, cupping Joshua’s chin in her hand. “Such a loss.”

“Come, Joshua, let us go out in the garden,” Lance said, suddenly standing. “There are beautiful roses blooming in the corner that I believe you have not yet seen.” He grabbed his brother by the arm and almost dragged him from the room.

“I saw the roses yesterday,” Joshua insisted, but Lance pulled him along anyway.

Lance waited until they were out of sight of the parlor window, and took Joshua by the shoulders. “Tell me the truth, Joshua. How does this news make you feel?”

“Well, of course the sound of his name does make my heart jump a bit,” Joshua admitted. “But it is not as if we shall see him. If he is simply coming to hunt, we will not meet him in a public place, such as a dinner or a dance. He will more than likely keep to himself.” Joshua smiled, but his eyes were sad. “I just wish people did not feel the need to talk about it.”

“Mamma has no control over her tongue, you know that,” Lance said. “And our aunt does not help.” He sighed. “My poor Joshua…I would do anything to get you the happiness you so richly deserve.”

They returned to the house in time to hear their mother say, “Sir, as soon as he has arrived and settled, you must wait on him.”
“I must do no such thing,” Mr. Harless retorted. “Allow the man to visit his own home in peace.”

“Everyone else will visit him!”

“Well, then I would just be standing in line, wouldn’t I?” Mr. Harless asked.

“It would be rude,” Lynn replied. “However, it will not stop me from inviting him to dinner. We will invite a few other couples, and make a nice party. Don’t you think that would be nice, Joshua?”

“Of...of course, Mamma,” Joshua said weakly. “If you think so.”

“We all need a nice evening, after saying goodbye to dear Justin,” Lynn said with a sigh.

They were all surprised, then, when Mr. Kirkpatrick and Mr. McLean arrived unannounced a few days later. Joshua sat meekly on a chair in the corner, but his eyes never left Mr. Kirkpatrick’s face. Mr. Kirkpatrick tried to focus on what Lynn said to him, but it was obvious that his sole focus of attention was Joshua.

For once Lance was at a loss for words. Mr. McLean looked dashing in his suit of black silk, his brown eyes dark and unreadable. There were so many things Lance wished to say, but it was neither the time nor the place. He hadn’t even spoken to Joshua about what Mr. McLean had done for Justin.

“How are your aunt and uncle?” Mr. McLean finally asked Lance.

“They...they are well, thank you. I had a letter from my aunt the other day, and she did not mention any problems.” Mr. McLean nodded. “And your brother?”

“He is well, thank you,” Mr. McLean answered, unable to keep from smiling at the mention of his beloved brother. “He has been reading more, and I believe I have you to thank for that.” Lance blushed and did not reply.

“Mr. Kirkpatrick, I assume you have heard that my youngest is now married,” Lynn was saying, and Lance winced. He watched Mr. McLean, whose countenance had darkened.

“Yes...yes I have. Congratulations,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said, drawing his eyes from Joshua.

“We will miss him so, but that is what happens when one’s children marry off,” she said with a sigh. “Speaking of going away, how long do you believe you will be in town, sir?”

“Well...I...a few weeks, I would suppose,” Mr. Kirkpatrick stammered.

“You must make time this week for dinner here, Mr. Kirkpatrick,” Lynn said as the men stood to leave. “You promised you would if you ever returned.”

“I would be flattered,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said. “I accept your invitation.”

Mr. McLean said nothing more, but bowed respectfully to everyone, including Lynn. The family walked the men out, and watched as they mounted their horses. As they rode away, Lynn, Howard and Nickolas returned to the house, but Joshua and Lance remained at the drive. Lance watched the dark figure disappear down the lane, his heart in his shoes. Mr. McLean had been much friendlier in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Bass; Lance could find no reason why he had even come on the visit.

“Well...that is a great relief,” Joshua said, snapping Lance from his reverie. “The first visit is done. We were able to speak amiably, and I feel perfectly at ease now. I know what I am capable of, and
shall never be embarrassed again to be in the same room with him.”

“I do not believe you are so easy about it,” Lance said. “But if it strengthens you to think so…”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, Joshua,” Lance said, patting his arm. “You are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever, just by being your wonderful self.” Lance returned to the house.

Lynn held her dinner party the next week, and her pleasure was obvious when Mr. Kirkpatrick took the seat next to Joshua. Lance found himself seated far from Mr. McLean, which disappointed him. He had to smile to himself; at one time, it would not have been disagreeable in the slightest. After dinner, when they gathered for coffee, Mr. McLean made sure to find his way to Lance’s side.

“A very pleasant evening,” Mr. McLean offered, and Lance could only nod.

“We can offer nothing more, really. I’m sure an evening at Pemberly would be much more interesting.”

“I assure you that our evenings are quite dull. On occasion, Kristopher will play the pianoforte. As you know, I’m not much of a conversationalist.”

“I’m sure that among friends, you are full of wit and charm,” Lance said before he thought.

Mr. McLean smiled, a true smile that made his brown eyes sparkle. “I appreciate the compliment, but I must admit that my friend has wit and charm enough for the both of us.” He nodded towards Mr. Kirkpatrick, who was deep in conversation with Joshua.

“Yes, like my brother,” Lance said. “He can speak with anyone, and always seem to be truly interested in every word they say.”

“He has a pure soul,” Mr. McLean said.

“Yes,” Lance said in surprise.

Lynn’s evening was complete when she found Mr. Kirkpatrick saying a private goodbye to Joshua. She urged him to visit the next day, which he did, and then invited him for the following day. He spent an hour with them, sitting and chatting in the garden. Lynn suggested he come and shoot with Mr. Harless the day after, and Mr. Kirkpatrick eagerly agreed. Mr. Harless was not averse to the idea, and Lynn could barely contain herself as she watched the two men walk down the lane.

“Oh, Joshua, I just KNOW he will ask your father today!”

“Mamma, do not excite yourself,” Joshua said quietly. “I do not believe anything of the sort. We have become friends to Mr. Kirkpatrick, that is all.”

Lance snorted. “Joshua, there are many other people he could be spending his time with.”

“Well, many people are busy, and…”

“And many people do not interest him as much as YOU do,” Lance interrupted. Joshua blushed but said nothing.

Two days later, Mr. Kirkpatrick visited again, and this time they sat in the parlor, staring at one
another. Mr. Kirkpatrick kept clearing his through and glancing at Joshua. “Nickolas, Howard…I just remembered something I need your help with,” Lynn said suddenly, jumping to her feet. “Follow me to the kitchen, please.”

Joshua looked mortified. Howard and Nickolas followed their mother from the room. Lance slowly got up and went to peruse the bookshelf, making sure his back was to the others. He pretended to be very interested in a book on local wildlife, and smiled as he saw Mr. Kirkpatrick move to sit next to Joshua on the settee.

“Lance!” Nickolas poked his head in the door, giving Joshua an apologetic smile. “We…we could not help Mamma. She said to come fetch you.”

“Indeed,” Lance said wryly. “Excuse me,” he said to Joshua and Mr. Kirkpatrick.

Instead of going to the kitchen, where he was sure his mother was pacing a path in the floor, he went up to his bedroom. He sat down and composed a brief letter to his aunt, intentionally refraining from completing it. After what he considered to be a respectable amount of time, he returned downstairs, and slowly opened the door to the parlor.

Mr. Kirkpatrick and Joshua were standing by the window. One of Mr. Kirkpatrick’s hands was at Joshua’s waist, and the other was resting at the back of his neck. Joshua swiftly turned when he heard the door, his face lighting up when he saw who it was. “Excuse me,” Mr. Kirkpatrick said, unable to keep the smile from his face. He left the room, and Lance turned to Joshua.

“Well?”

“It is…it is too much!” Joshua said, beaming. His blue eyes were full of tears. “I cannot believe it. I do not deserve it!”

“Stop this immediately,” Lance said, feeling tears in his own eyes. “You deserve it more than anyone in the world. Oh, dear Joshua, I am so happy for you!” He embraced his brother.

“He loves me. He has never stopped. All along he…” Joshua shook his head. “Why can’t everyone feel as I do right now? I must go to Mamma. I know Mr. Kirkpatrick has gone to Papa now.”

“Mr. Kirkpatrick?”

“Christopher,” Joshua whispered, turning pink. He squeezed Lance’s arm and hurried from the room.

Lance sank onto a chair, sighing. “Finally,” he said to himself. “After his sister’s attempts to marry him away, after his friend’s attempts to dissuade him.”

Mr. Kirkpatrick returned to the room. “Oh! Lance! Where...where is Joshua?”

“He has gone to our mother,” Lance said. He stood and held out his hand. “Please allow me to congratulate you and welcome you to our family.”

“Thank you.” Christopher Kirkpatrick smiled and took Lance’s hand in both of his. “I eagerly look forward to when I may officially call you my brother.”

“I as well,” Lance said sincerely.

Soon the family gathered in the parlor for a celebratory toast. There was such smiling, such rejoicing, that no one would have imagined that just weeks before they were in the depths of despair over
Justin’s elopement.
Chapter 17

SEVENTEEN

About a week after the engagement was formed, Mr. Kirkpatrick and the family were sitting in the dining room. They heard a carriage pull around the drive, and looked at each other in surprise.

"Were you expecting anyone, Mamma?" Howard asked.

"No, I assure you."

Mr. Kirkpatrick looked uncomfortable. "Joshua, shall we walk a bit?"

"Of course." Joshua stood and followed Mr. Kirkpatrick from the room.

Not five minutes after their departure, the door opened again, and Lord Louis Pearlman entered the room. He sat down in Mr. Kirkpatrick’s vacated chair. "Mamma, Lord Louis Pearlman," Lance murmured.

"We are honored by your visit, sir," Lynn said politely.

Lord Louis nodded curtly. "I hope you are well, Lance," he said finally. "This is your mother?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your brothers?"

"Yes, sir," Lynn answered for Lance. "My youngest but one, Nickolas, and Howard, my middle son. My youngest is lately married, and my eldest is walking about with the man who will soon be my son-in-law."

"There seems to be very nice gardens here," Lord Louis said to Lance, ignoring Lynn. "I would ask you to take a turn with me."

"Of course, sir," Lance said, slowly getting to his feet. He followed Lord Louis out of the house.

They started towards the gardens at a sedate pace, Lance’s mind whirling. Finally Lord Louis said, "I am sure you know full well why I am come, Lance."

"You...you are mistaken, sir. I have no idea as to why you have honored my family with a visit."

"I do not wish to be made the fool, Lance." Lord Louis’ tone grew angry. "I knew that your eldest brother was betrothed, and exactly who he was betrothed to. I also know that you will soon be following him down the matrimonial path."

"ME?" Lance gasped. He stopped walking. "With whom, may I ask?"

"With whom? Do you think me an idiot?" Lord Louis snapped. "With my nephew, Alexander McLean! As soon as I heard the news, I prepared myself and undertook this journey."

"Well, if this news 'tis true, why have you come?"

"To insist that you refute all such talk immediately."
“I…” Lance was genuinely at a loss for words.

“I need to know the truth, young man. Are you engaged to my nephew?”

“That really is no business of yours, sir,” Lance said bravely, standing his ground.

“It IS my business! He is my relative, and it is my job to protect his good name. If someone is pronouncing such rubbish, I need to nip it in the bud!”

“I assure you that I did not start such gossip,” Lance promised him.

“I assume you can understand my distaste at the entire matter,” Lord Louis continued. “Mr. McLean is to marry someone of wealth and good standing.”

“He is a gentleman. I am a gentleman’s son,” Lance reminded him.

“But what about the rest of your family? And this brother of yours who committed such shocking social errors!”

“Whatever the case, it does not concern you,” Lance said. “If your nephew does not care, why should you?”

“Are…you…engaged?” Lord Louis bellowed.

“We are not,” Lance finally admitted.

“And will you agree never to enter into an engagement with him?”

“I absolutely will not,” Lance said, growing angry as well. “You have no business coming here and ordering me about in this manner. I am a grown man, as is your nephew. It is our decision as to what path our futures take. If our paths are destined to intertwine, so be it. Your nephew is a decent, intelligent man, and I am sure he needs no guidance from you.”

“Oh!” Lord Louis said, smacking his cane against the ground. “Do you not understand that an alliance with you would only disgrace him and his good name?”

“I understand that he would be guided by his heart and common sense, as would I.”

“I have heard enough,” Lord Louis said. “Rest assured that I will do everything in my power to thwart any plan of yours to marry my nephew and his money.”

“I stand forewarned,” Lance said sarcastically. Lord Louis huffed and returned to his carriage.

Lance turned and walked towards the house, his hands clenched into fists. His anger was the only thing keeping him in motion; his legs were shaking so he hardly believe he was still standing.

“Why did you not ask Lord Louis in for tea?” Lynn demanded as soon as he came into the house.

“He…he would not stay, Mamma,” Lance said faintly.

“Yes…yes, I am fine, thank you.” Lance went upstairs and fell onto his bed, staring at the ceiling. He could not possibly know how such rumors had reached the ear of Lord Louis Pearlman. Lance knew for certain that Alexander McLean had no possible interest in him now. The only thing he could reason was that people heard about Christopher and Joshua, and made the assumption that Mr. McLean was interested in his best friend’s future brother-in-law.
The next morning, Mr. Harless called Lance into his study. “I have something here that I believe will amuse you, Lance,” his father said. “Please sit. I have a letter here from our cousin, Mr. Littrell.”

“Oh?” Lance said, trying to seem interested. “How is Britney?”

“Fine, I am sure, although she is not the reason for his correspondence,” Mr. Harless said. “This principally concerns YOU. Apparently I have TWO sons on the brink of matrimony.” Lance turned red. “He begins, of course, with a flowery discussion on matrimony, and the pride I must feel at Joshua’s engagement. I will not bore you with that. What relates to you is as follows: “Having offered you my most sincere congratulations, I must now discuss at topic which is not as joyful. It has come to my attention that your son Lance will not be of your household for long, and will move to become the partner of one of the most illustrious persons in the land.” Can you imagine who he means, Lance?”

“I…I could not say, Papa.”

“Well, listen to this. “The gentleman of which I speak has been blessed with everything one could ask for…a handsome face, a genteel upbringing, and a large fortune. Unfortunately, his family does not bless the marriage, and this gentleman’s uncle in particular is someone Lance would not wish to make unhappy.” Do you know who he means, Lance? Mr. McLean!”

“Oh,” Lance said faintly.

“The entire thing is ridiculous! Are you not amused?”

“Oh, quite amused,” Lance promised.

“I will not insult your intelligence by retelling the rest of the letter. He goes on to warn you some more, and then he blathers a bit about Justin and that situation.” Mr. Harless studied Lance. “You are not offended in any way.”

“No, Papa, of course not.” Lance stood. “I have never taken anything Mr. Littrell has said to heart.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Mr. Harless. “Of all men…Mr. McLean! Why, he’s never given you the time of day!”

“Yes,” Lance said simply, then excused himself.

Two days later, Mr. Kirkpatrick arrived for his visit with Joshua, bringing Mr. McLean with him. Lynn immediately invited them to sit in the parlor, but Mr. Kirkpatrick said, “It is a beautiful day. Why don’t we all take a walk?”

Lynn and Howard declined. The others agreed, and they soon were walking down the lane. Joshua and Christopher lagged behind everyone else, and Nickolas mutely kept pace with Lance and Mr. McLean. It was obvious Nickolas was in awe of their visitor, for he spoke as little as Lance had ever heard. Finally, as they approached the turn to the Spears home, Nickolas said, “Lance, would it be all right if I went to call on Jamie-Lynn?”

“Oh, Lance said. Nickolas nodded and broke into a run. Lance and Mr. McLean walked on a bit in silence, and Lance finally said, “Mr. McLean, you must allow me to thank you for your kindness to Justin. I have been waiting for the right moment to say something to you, and since my
family does not know of your generosity, I have not yet had the chance to speak.”

“I…I did not expect that you would hear of it.” Lance was surprised to hear Mr. McLean stammer.

“I assure you that my aunt and uncle did not betray your trust. As you may have noticed, Justin is not the most trustworthy person when it comes to important issues.” Mr. McLean smiled, a sight that sent a bit of a thrill down Lance’s spine. “I can only say that you have done my family an incredible service, and on their behalf I give you my most heartfelt thanks.”

Mr. McLean stopped walking and put a hand on Lance’s arm. “Lance, thank me for yourself alone, because as much as I respect your family, I thought only of you.” Lance swallowed deeply as he looked into the brown eyes. “I believe you are too kind-hearted to toy with me. If your feelings are still as they were when we last had this discussion, please let me know. My thoughts and feelings are unchanged, but if you wish, you will never hear of this again.”

Lance felt his knees buckle, and he place his hands on Mr. McLean’s arms to steady himself. “I…I…” Lance looked down at his feet, then back up again. “Mr. McLean…Alexander…please believe me when I say my feelings are nowhere NEAR what they were when we last spoke.” Mr. McLean closed his eyes for a brief moment, then opened them again. “I was a wretched man to say such things to you, and now I am embarrassed to remember them. You are the kindest, most generous of men, and I cannot believe that you could possibly still have room in your heart to love me.”

“Room in my heart?” Mr. McLean reached up and touched Lance’s cheek. “I feel that my heart cannot contain everything I feel for you. You have brought out emotions and passions in me that I do not believe I have ever felt.”

“More than likely anger, shock and disgust,” Lance said, smiling with trembling lips.

“No.” Mr. McLean shook his head. “You had every right to see me as you did. What did I possibly show you to make you think I was worthy of your attention?”

“Worthy of my attention?”

“Lance, in everything you say and do, there is one very clear statement you make: you refuse to be anyone but yourself, and if someone does not appreciate it, then you do not appreciate them.” Mr. McLean took Lance’s hands in his. “You cannot imagine how attractive that makes you to others…especially others who find it very difficult to accept themselves the way they are.”

“You?”

“Let me simply say that I have never had that ease at making friends and creating relationships, because I have been unable to present myself completely to someone.” Mr. McLean brought Lance’s hand to his mouth and kissed it. “Until I met you. I have been hateful and cold. Can you forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” Lance said, laughing. “Can YOU forgive ME? I have not Joshua’s way of making everyone feel comfortable and at ease. “

“And I have not Christopher’s manner of making everyone happy to see him as soon as he enters a room.”

“It is because of you that he is here, is it not?” Lance asked.

Mr. McLean frowned a bit. “Yes, though it is due to my interference that it took him so long in the first place. The night before I went to London to find your brother, I sat him down and told him
everything. I especially emphasized the way your brother felt for him. Thankfully, he is a good and understanding friend and was able to forgive me.”

Lance looked over his shoulder. “The others have turned back. I suppose we should as well.”

“I suppose so.” Mr. McLean made no attempt at moving away. He placed his hands on Lance’s shoulders and moved close. Lance felt his heart leap into his ears as Alexander McLean’s lips met his.

“And now I may finally tell you why.”

Lance related the entire story of Mr. McLean’s involvement in Justin’s marriage. “I do not know what to say,” Joshua said when Lance had finally finished. “But I see in your eyes that this is not the only reason you love him. I am so happy for you.” The brothers embraced.

“Oh, dear,” Lynn sighed as she looked out the window. “Mr. McLean has accompanied Mr. Kirkpatrick AGAIN. Why can he not simply stay home?” She turned to Lance. “Lance, you must
walk out with him again, so he will not be in our way OR Mr. Kirkpatrick’s.”

“I will find it in myself to make the sacrifice, Mama,” Lance said, unable to keep from smiling. He heard Joshua chuckle.

When the men came in, Mr. Kirkpatrick greeted Lance with extra warmth, and shook his hand a bit longer than usual. Lance knew that the friends had spoken, and returned the greeting with equal force. “Why do you not take the gentlemen up to Oakham Mount? It is a good morning for such a walk, and there will be such a pretty view,” Lynn suggested.

“I believe that is a wonderful idea, Mama,” Lance said, turning to Mr. McLean. “That is, sir, if you do not mind a lengthy walk.”

“I will follow where you lead,” Mr. McLean said, giving a short bow.

They left a few moments ahead of Mr. Kirkpatrick and Joshua. “I must apologize for the way my mother behaves around you,” Lance said. “It is an apology I have wished to give you for some time.”

“We cannot help our relatives,” Mr. McLean said with a smile. “Do not forget, you’ve met one of mine.”

“Ah, of course, Lord Louis,” Lance said with a laugh. “Not one of my greatest supporters.”

“We can both do without his support,” Mr. McLean said. He took Lance’s hand, and smiled as Lance’s cheeks turned pink. “As we speak of relatives…when may I talk to your father?”

“Tonight, if you like,” Lance said nonchalantly. “Or if you wish to wait until tomorrow…”

“I do not wish to wait at all,” Mr. McLean said immediately. “And your mother?”

“Leave her to me,” Lance said with a sigh. He knew that Lynn would be overcome by the idea of yet another wealthy son-in-law, but she also had vehemently proclaimed her dislike of Mr. McLean to whomever would listen. “I do not wish you to have to deal with her any more than is necessary.”

“Very well.”

They strolled a bit, and then Lance said, “Regarding family…your brother. Will he be unhappy to hear that he must share you with someone?”

“On the contrary. He admires you very much,” Mr. McLean insisted. “I wrote to him the moment you accepted my proposal. I think he can only benefit by having someone like you in his life.”

“Oh.” Lance was embarrassed by the praise. “I know how close the two of you are. I could not bear it if Joshua could not love the person I was to marry, so I know what it would be like for you.”

“I promise that Kristopher will be thrilled,” Mr. McLean said.

“If you say so,” Lance said.

That evening, soon after Mr. Harless rose to return to his study, Lance watched Mr. McLean follow him. Lance frowned and studied the flames in the fireplace. He did not believe his father would refuse his blessing, but he knew his father would be saddened by the loss of Joshua and Lance in such quick succession.
“Lance, you look positively ill. Is everything all right?” Nickolas asked.

“I am fine, I assure you. Tired, perhaps,” Lance answered.

Shortly thereafter, Mr. McLean returned to the room, and gave Lance a triumphant look. He casually walked about the room, then stopped at the back of Lance’s seat. “Your father wants you in his study,” he whispered, then moved to sit with Joshua and Mr. Kirkpatrick.

Lance slowly went to the library, and stood in the doorway for a moment. Mr. Harless was pacing the floor, biting at his bottom lip. When he saw Lance, he motioned for him to enter. As soon as Lance closed the door, Mr. Harless said, “Lance…what are you doing? Are you out of your mind? You wish to marry Alexander McLean? Have you not always hated him?”

Lance wished for yet another time that he could bury the hateful words he had used in describing the man he now loved. “I realize this is a shock, Papa, but it is all true. I do mean to accept him.”

“Well, you will be well off for the rest of your life, that is assured. You will have clothing and carriages and balls and everything you could desire. You will even be more well off than Joshua, I declare. But will you be happy, my boy?”

“Other than the question of my true feelings,” Lance said. “Do you have any other objection?”

“Well, no. He is just so unpleasant, so cold. If you really liked him…”

“Oh, I DO, Papa,” Lance said earnestly. He took his father’s hand, surprising him. “I don’t just like him, I love him. He has no improper pride. He is completely warm and amiable, when you get to know him. He is intelligent, witty, educated, even charming, when he wishes to be.”

Mr. Harless took Lance by the arm and led him to a seat. “Lance, I have given him my consent. I can only advise you to think carefully of everything involved. I know you could not be happy if you could not respect your partner. Your partner would have to be someone of great merit for you to agree to spend the rest of your life with him. Do not give me the grief of seeing YOU unable to respect your partner in life.”

“Papa…I realize that at the beginning, he was not everything to me the way he is now. But I suppose you could say that he has grown on me.” Lance smiled. “He is thoughtful and generous. Behind the proud and cold exterior is someone who is quite shy. If you could see how he dotes on his younger brother! Even his staff speak warmly of him.”

“Well, my son, I have nothing else to say. If he is everything you say he is, he deserves you. I could not have parted with you to anyone even the slightest bit unworthy of you.”

“Oh, Papa!” Lance surprised his father yet again by giving him a long hug. “I must now tell you something that will shock you more.” Lance continued to tell the story of Mr. McLean’s involvement with Adam Lambert and Justin.

“Well! Will wonders never cease.” Mr. Harless shook his head. “Made the match…gave the money…paid the debts. Actually, he has done more for me than even this. If it were truly your uncle’s work and his funds, I would HAVE to pay him back. However, I imagine that I must only OFFER to pay back your Mr. McLean, and he will say he did it all for you, and he cannot accept a penny.”

“Papa!” Lance said, but he smiled.

Later that evening, Lance followed his mother up to her room. “Lance, I almost fell over you, you
follow me so closely!” Lynn exclaimed. “What are you about?”

“I have something to tell you, Mama.” He led her to a chair and carefully sat her down. “I am to marry Alexander McLean.” Lynn’s mouth fell open. “Yes, you heard me correctly. He has proposed, I have accepted, and Papa has given his blessing.”

Lynn sat quietly for longer than Lance could have ever imagined. She stood up, then fell back into her chair again. “Goodness…dear me! Mr. McLean? Who would have ever thought he…is this true? Oh, Lance!” Lynn threw herself into his arms. “Just think how WEALTHY you will be! Pin-money, horses, holidays…Joshua is nothing compared to this! I am so pleased. What a CHARMING man! Handsome, too. Oh, I AM sorry for everything I’ve said before. I hope he will overlook it.” Lynn began to scurry around the room, unable to keep still. “Three sons married…ten thousand a year!”

“Good night, Mama,” Lance said. He caught her and kissed her cheek before leaving the room.

“I must ask you something,” Lance said, locking his arm in Mr. McLean’s as they walked the next day. “Whatever made you fall in love with ME?”

Mr. McLean looked surprised. “Where does this line of questioning come from?”

Lance shrugged. “This morning over breakfast I was privy to a long list of things that Mamma finds worthy in you, and I was curious how I possibly caught your attention.”

Mr. McLean laughed, a sound Lance was quickly coming to adore. “I realize that it probably seemed quite sudden to you. It was quite sudden to me.”

“It is not my looks, that I know,” Lance said. “I realize that when I stand next to Joshua…”

“When you stand next to anyone, I forget they are there,” Mr. McLean said softly. Lance turned deep red and stumbled over his own feet.

“And I surely was not at all friendly towards you. I did not act in a welcoming manner.”

“And was I the picture of amiability and charm?” Mr. McLean said. “You put everyone else to shame, Lance. Your intelligence, your wit…” Mr. McLean ghosted his finger over Lance’s cheek. “Your skin, your eyes…”

“But even after I refused you, your feelings did not fade.”

“No, they did not. I was so glad to be able to help your family, because I felt I was helping YOU. And then when Lord Louis returned and told me of your conversation…”

“THAT.” Lance rolled his eyes. “If you only knew the things I wanted to say and didn’t. I would have put many a sailor to shame.”

“Someone SHOULD talk to him that way…perhaps it would do him good,” Mr. McLean said, laughing. “At least he was helpful in one respect. He gave me hope.”

“Does he know about our current situation?”

“I do not believe so.” Mr. McLean sighed. “I suppose I should write him a letter, give him the bad news.”

“I must write to my aunt as well! We shall do so when we return to the house,” Lance said
decidedly.

“Taking charge already?” Mr. McLean teased.

“I believe there will never be a question which one of us knows best,” Lance said, and Mr. McLean gave him a playful growl.
EIGHTEEN

Lord Pearlman,

I write to you of something that I presume you have already heard. I have made Lance Harless an offer of marriage, and he has accepted. I realize that this is something you hoped would not happen; I am sorry to disappoint you. I am master of my own fate, however, and plan to do this with or without your approval.

With regards, your nephew, etc.

My dearest aunt,

I am sorry that I have taken so long to return your letter, but when I tell you my news, you will see the reason for my tardiness. As you can see by my penmanship, I am too overjoyed to even write you this letter without shaking. Alexander McLean has asked for my hand, and I have most readily given it. I owe this all to you, because if you would not have suggested we visit Pemberly that day, perhaps none of this would have fallen into place. I am happier than even Joshua at this moment. He smiles, but I laugh all day long. Mr. McLean sends you all the love in the world that he is not giving to me. You are all to come visit Pemberly at Christmas – we insist!

Your very loving nephew, Lance

Mr. Littrell,

I know we have just received your letter of congratulations regarding Joshua’s engagement, but now I must ask you to put pen to paper yet again. Lance will soon be the partner of Mr. McLean. Console Lord Louis as best you can, but if I were you, I would not write off the nephew just yet.

Your cousin, etc.

Dearest Joshua,

My brother to be! Kate and I were overjoyed when Christopher told us the news. You can only bring sunshine and happiness to our dull family. I always knew that you would be the one to win my brother’s heart, and I cannot wait to spend time with you. We can walk in the gardens, have tea together, and when in London, what fun we will have attending plays and balls and such! Please know that my heart is bursting forth with affection for you.

Sincerely yours, Molly Kirkpatrick

My very dearest and kindest brother,

When I received your letter, I admit I had to sit down in the nearest chair. Not because of your choice
in partners, but in disbelief that you had finally found someone to make you happy in this manner. You deserve the best, dear Alexander, and I believe Lance is he. Such a charming, wonderful, kind person, attractive in both face and manner. I have always felt quite at ease with him, and that is the best compliment I can pay. I do hope that we shall live happily together until the time comes for me to leave for a home of my own, but I honestly admit that I hope that will not be for a long time. I eagerly await your return so I may embrace you both.

Your loving brother, Kristopher

Brother Lance,

Lord, I must admit I was completely surprised when I received the letter from Mamma. You and Mr. McLean! I never supposed your sights were set so high – even higher than Joshua! But what excites me most is that we will now have a new home to visit. I cannot wait to get to know your new husband. If you love him half as much as I love my dear Adam, you must be happy. If you have nothing else to do while counting your money, you might think of us. I do not think we will have quite enough money to live on without help. Of course, if you do not feel comfortable asking him for assistance, then don’t. Just remember your favorite younger brother when you can, and invite us any time.

Justin


“I will not hold a candle to you.” Lance smoothed down the velvet of his new green suit. “That color brings out your eyes. If Mr. Kirkpatrick wasn’t smitten before, he will be when he sees you.”

“It is nice,” Joshua admitted, looking at his dark blue suit one last time.

“Are you sure you do not mind?” Lance asked, frowning.

“Lance. I believe this is the thirtieth time we’ve had this conversation.” Joshua took Lance’s hands in his. “I love the fact that I get to share this special day with you, of all people. You never lost faith in Christopher’s love for me.”

“How could he not love you?” Lance said. “I just want to be sure. It is your day, as the eldest.”

“If anyone stole the day from me, it is Justin,” Joshua reminded him. “We can blame him.”

“Perfect,” Lance said, smiling. Then he sighed. “Poor Papa. I suppose it is best that he lose us both in one day.”

“I’m sure he will visit often,” Joshua said. “Most definitely to see you.”

“Well, Nickolas has improved of late…perhaps he can take our place,” Lance suggested.

“We shall see about that,” Joshua replied.

The door flew open without a knock. “Oh, here are my blessed boys!” Lynn drew them both into a smothering embrace before they could stop her. “The carriage is waiting to take us to the church. I
need to give you one last kiss.” She kissed them both.

“Mamma, you’re wrinkling us,” Joshua finally managed, and she released them.

“You’ll visit often, won’t you?” Lynn held her handkerchief to her eye. “And invites us to see you?”

“Of course,” Joshua said immediately, but Lance simply smiled.

“You have Howard and Nickolas, Mamma.”

“Oh, Howard and Nickolas.” Lynn waved her handkerchief in the air.

“Come, boys…it’s time,” Mr. Harless said from the doorway.

“Yes, Papa,” Joshua said obediently. He and Lynn left the room.

Mr. Harless looked at Lance. “Well, my boy. You move on to a new and exciting life. Hope you don’t forget us.”

“Oh, Papa.” Lance hugged him long and hard. “You may visit us any time. I mean it. And you may even bring Mamma on occasion.”

“I thought you were offering me a holiday, Lance,” Mr. Harless said with a smile. “Come now. Your groom awaits.”

The next hour passed in a blur, and later Lance could hardly remember its events. He remembered Lynn fidgeting over them at the back of the church, and he remembered walking down the aisle next to Joshua. What was burned in his brain, however, was the way that Alexander McLean looked at him when he took his place at Lance’s side.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you Christopher and Joshua Kirkpatrick, and Alexander and Lance McLean,” the reverend proclaimed, and Lance heard his mother sob.

Alexander turned to Lance, smiling as he removed his hat. Holding it in front of their faces, he gave Lance a long, passionate kiss, full of such intensity that Lance’s face was flaming red when they pulled apart.

“Congratulations!” Kristopher McLean was the first one to reach them, taking Lance’s hand and shaking it hard. “Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you, Kristopher.” Lance hugged him, then released him to his brother. He turned to Joshua, who had tears in his eyes.

“Oh, Lance, could you ever dream we would be this happy?”

“No,” Lance admitted. He hugged his brother, then turned to his husband, who kissed him again in front of everyone.

THE END

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