A Matter of Secrecy

by Shrubbery_Girl

Summary

Adventure, Espionage, True Love: The Full Frontal Truth about Louisa Hurst's marriage and all that it entailed.
It is never easy coming face-to-face with one’s past, especially when it is a past one would much rather forget. Louisa Bingley made just this experience when, upon walking in a fashionable London Park one morning, she encountered a man whom she had not seen in nearly a decade, and attempted to forget for almost as long. Nevertheless, upon his lifting his hat, her good manners dictated that she acknowledge the acquaintance, and she stiffly curtsied.

She had already passed him, and continued on her walk, when he cried out to her.

‘Excuse me, madam!’

She turned around to face him.

‘You appear to have dropped your handkerchief,’ he said and bent down to pick up a handkerchief that Louisa knew perfectly well not to belong to her, for all that it looked just like one of hers.

He had pressed it into her hands and was gone before she could clear up the matter. When she pocketed the handkerchief, she noted that something stiff was enclosed in it and unfolding it, she saw a slip of paper on which a note was scribbled.

*When you leave the park by its western exit and continue on the left, you shall find a small tea-room run by a Mrs Miggins. Sit down and order and I shall join you there in fifteen minutes. Lose your maid. C.*

Why she did as she was bid, Louisa could not say, but she went to Mrs Miggins’ tea-room as outlined in the note and, upon entering it, recalled that she was in dire need of some ornament for her new shoes, and sent her maid away with very precise instructions. True to his word, the gentleman arrived precisely a quarter of an hour after the encounter in the park and immediately found her table, which was situated in the darkest corner of the room.

‘Lieutenant –’ Louisa began, but he cut her short.

‘*Mr Hurst,*’ he said. ‘*Algernon Montgomery Hurst, Esq.*’

Louisa raised her eyebrows and mustered him. He looked every bit the gentleman of leisure, from his recently cut hair to his polished riding boots. His clothes were cut after the latest fashion and had obviously been expensive. It was a marked difference from the young, carelessly dressed lieutenant she had known. His manner was curt and his tone betrayed confidence, and yet, Louisa could not help but notice a certain stiffness in his bearing that signaled tension. She wondered briefly if he maybe was as uneasy as she was, but dismissed that thought when her gaze fell on the stern, passionless lines of his face. It was difficult to find the lieutenant with his youthful awkwardness in those lines.

‘Not quite what I recall,’ she said.

‘I am aware of that,’ the gentleman calling himself Mr Hurst said. ‘However, we all have our little secrets, have we not?’

‘I fail to understand you,’ Louisa said.

‘Let me refresh your memory,’ the gentleman said, helping himself to one of the scones she had ordered. ‘You recall that you attended a Seminary for Young Ladies situated in Weymouth for a term
or two?"

‘Of course,’ Louisa said. ‘It was there that we met, if my memory does not fail me.’

‘Quite,’ the gentleman said. ‘As a matter of fact, we were introduced to each other by a young man whose acquaintance you had but recently made. We need not mention his name, I dare say, for it has been widely publicised in the newspapers lately.’

Louisa only nodded.

‘You may wonder what happened to our mutual friend after his, shall I say, share of the general attention,’ the gentleman continued. ‘I know it for a fact that he left England to begin a new life in an area he calls Indiana, which is, as I understand it, somewhere west of the former colonies.’

Louisa nodded again, more out of a necessity to indicate that she was listening than anything else.

‘I surmise he did not apprise you of his plans,’ the gentleman said, ‘which strikes me as odd, considering how close your friendship once was. Tell me, though, did you ever introduce him to your family?’

Louisa weakly shook her head.

‘I had guessed something of that kind, yes,’ the gentleman said. ‘How rude of you. But as I was saying, he left England earlier this year with the intention never to return. Unfortunately, he was not able to take all of what was left of his possessions, so he left some of it in my care to be seen to as I saw fit. It just so happens that among his possessions, I found a couple of very interesting items, among them letters of a rather delicate nature, shall we say -’

‘How much?’ Louisa whispered.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Bingley?’

‘How much do you want for the letters?’ Louisa asked.

‘Oh, my dear Miss Bingley,’ the gentleman said. ‘The letters as well as the other tokens of affection were evidently given to our friend from the heart. The cost of a life may be thirty shekels, but who can put a price on love?’

Louisa was silent.

‘Dear me,’ the gentleman said, ‘is that the time? I am afraid I must be going. It was very pleasant to chat about old times with you. With your permission, I shall call on you one of these days. You reside with your brother, I presume? If you wish to see me, you should instruct the butler to admit Algernon Montgomery Hurst, Esq. You could of course refuse to see me, but I flatter myself that you will love such an opportunity to talk about old times.’

‘I find you alone,’ the gentleman said, when he entered the parlour in Mr Bingley’s house two days later. ‘How disappointing. Not, of course, that I do not value your company, my dear Miss Bingley, but I had so hoped to make the acquaintance of your family soon.’

‘You can talk freely, Lieutenant,’ Louisa said when the door had closed behind the footman. ‘There is no one overhearing us. What do you want?’

‘First of all,’ the gentleman said, and all the pleasantness had disappeared from his voice, ‘it were
better if you recalled that I am not, nor ever was, a Lieutenant in His Majesty’s or any other Army. My name is, as I told you, Algernon Montgomery Hurst, Esq., son of Gilbert Hurst, late of Hurst Hall, near Thrompton in Warwickshire.’

‘I cannot see why I should bother to remember that,’ Louisa said coolly, with more bravado than she had thought she could muster.

‘Because, my dear,’ the gentleman said, ‘you are soon going to be Mrs Hurst.’

The epithet that escaped Louisa’s lips was wholly undignified for any lady, but seemed not to irritate the gentleman.

‘Now that I have caught your attention,’ he continued, ‘will you allow me to explain?’

‘Please do,’ Louisa said steely.

‘The facts as I see them are the following,’ the gentleman said. ‘First, that there are certain incidents in your past which you would rather not have referred to by anyone.’

Louisa agreed.

‘Second, that currently, you and I are the only persons in this kingdom aware of these incidents having taken place and of your connection with a certain person.’

Louisa agreed again that unfortunately, that was the case.

‘Third, that I am in possession of certain documents and other items which would prove that you were connected to that certain person and that the incidents I mentioned did indeed take place.’

‘I was but fifteen!’ Louisa exclaimed.

‘A very unwise age to make such major decisions,’ the gentleman agreed, ‘and yet you made them, Louisa.’

‘Miss Bingley to you,’ Louisa hissed.

‘If you insist,’ the gentleman said, unmoved. ‘Having thus established the facts between us, let me now come to what I propose we do.’

Louisa gesticulated for him to continue.

‘It is now May,’ the gentleman said. ‘Am I correct in assuming that you plan to remain in London until August, at which time you and your siblings are invited to spend the rest of the summer at Pemberley, in Derbyshire, in the company of Mr and Miss Darcy?’

Louisa indicated that this was indeed the case.

‘It would then be wise if we were married in July,’ the gentleman said, ‘retreat on our honeymoon for a couple of weeks – I leave the choice of place to you – and then join your family at Pemberley for the summer.’

‘I will most certainly not -’

‘Let me continue, please,’ the gentleman said. ‘If all goes as is intended, my association with you shall be over by November at the latest. At that time, a dreadful accident shall befall me and leave you my mourning widow. Amidst my things, you shall find the deeds to Hurst Hall in your name as
well as a letter to my solicitor, signed by myself, in which I instruct him to deliver a certain locked box to you in the event of my death; the key for which you shall also find among my effects.’

Louisa said nothing.

‘You will then, of course, never hear from me again,’ the gentleman said. ‘I will be dead to you as much as I will be dead to the world.’

Louisa still said nothing.

‘Moreover, I can assure you now that our marriage will only ever be a marriage in name. There need to be no sacrifices on your part other than taking my name and bearing my company over the summer. I will not force myself onto you or dishonour your wishes simply because it would be my right to do so.’

‘And if I do not agree?’ Louisa asked.

‘Then, my dear, I am afraid, that certain box might accidentally make its way to one of London’s larger newspapers,’ the gentleman said.

‘I know your real name,’ Louisa said, ‘and I know whose son you are. I could choose to make that public.’

‘You could,’ the gentleman conceded. ‘But in what way would that help you? The very name to which you allude would protect me and the box would still be in my possession.’

‘I do not understand, though,’ Louisa insisted. ‘Why me? Why do you want to marry me?’

‘My dear,’ the gentleman said. ‘There can be no question of wanting. I am as averse to the idea as you are. However, it must be done, for reasons I cannot divulge to you, so you had better get used to it.’

‘I – I am not sure -’ Louisa began.

‘Very well, let us settle it this way,’ the gentleman suggested. ‘I will begin calling on you, with the appearance of courting you. In due course, I will propose marriage to you. If you still think you would rather not marry me, you can always refuse me. In the meantime, until you refuse me, the letters are safe in the box where they are.’

‘But that is blackmail!’ Louisa cried.

‘Of course it is,’ the gentleman said pleasantly. ‘Now, if you could let me know at which social occasions I would be most likely to meet you during the next two weeks, that would save me the trouble of having to bribe your servants.’

‘I do not like him one bit,’ Caroline Bingley said to her brother after Mr Hurst had called on them for the second time in as many days. ‘I do not like him at all.’

‘Louisa seems to encourage his attentions,’ Charles Bingley said.

‘Are you blind?’ Caroline said. ‘I would be prepared to bet a considerable sum of money that she detests him. Have you seen the way she looks at him?’

‘Nevertheless,’ Charles pointed out, ‘she particularly asked me to be allowed to include him in the invitations for our dinner party next week.’
'Lord, that will be the most dreadful evening of my life,' Caroline said. ‘I do not know what Louisa sees in him.’

‘Have you tried asking her?’ Charles suggested. ‘Do you two not normally talk about everything?’

‘I tried!’ Caroline said. ‘Several times, in fact, but she simply will not talk about it. Actually, that is what worries me most – she used to tell me everything.’

Caroline looked down and examined her hands.

‘I feel as if the Louisa I thought I knew was slipping through my fingers,’ she said. ‘Sorry, that sounded stupid.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Charles said and patted her hand.

‘If only she would tell me why she behaves that way,’ Caroline said. ‘Then maybe I could understand her.’

‘I am sure she will tell you when she is ready,’ Charles said reassuringly. ‘And maybe Mr Hurst will turn out to have some hidden value.’

‘I cannot believe it,’ Caroline said. ‘And he cannot be rich enough to make such a sacrifice on her part worth it. Have you any information regarding his finances?’

‘Not yet,’ Charles said, ‘but I could ask Darcy if he knows anything, if you think it needs to be done.’

‘I do think so,’ Caroline said. ‘I think Louisa is about to do something foolish, only I cannot tell why.’

‘It is very sudden,’ her brother agreed, ‘especially considering I only ever met the fellow last week. Did you know him previously?’

‘Not at all,’ Caroline said. ‘I never heard a word of him. Do you know how they met?’

‘At a ball, was it?’ Charles asked.

‘That is what she said,’ Caroline said, ‘and it certainly looked like that at the Whittington’s ball – but the whole affair was rather staged, if you ask me. Mrs Whittington told me she did not even know Mr Hurst, so I have no idea how he got there.’

Charles was silent, rubbing his chin, lost in thought.

‘Do, please, ask Mr Darcy if he knows anything about this Mr Hurst,’ Caroline insisted. ‘I would feel better if I knew that at least he was not a fraud.’

‘Your sister seems intent upon making a catch of Mr Darcy,’ the gentleman known as Mr Hurst observed to Louisa on one of their by now customary walks in the park.

‘That is hardly your business,’ Louisa hissed.

‘On the contrary, it is very much my business,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I like this development immensely.’

‘But Mr Darcy does not care one jot about Caroline,’ Louisa cried, ‘and I believe she is on a good way of seeing that as well.’
'Then, my dear,' Mr Hurst said, ‘you will see to it that she does not.’

Louisa shook her head.

‘You will make sure that she thinks she might succeed,’ Mr Hurst insisted. ‘You will encourage her in every possible way, and you will drop hints to your friends that you think she might be proposed to.’

‘I will most certainly not do that!’ Louisa cried.

‘You will, dear, you will,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘And now smile. Your brother is looking at us. I have just complimented you on your beautiful eyes, so you could also blush, if you like.’

‘You have what?’ Caroline asked her brother. ‘You have what?’

Charles took great care in selecting an apple out of the fruit bowl before he answered.

‘I have given Mr Hurst leave to marry Louisa,’ Charles explained.

‘Yes, I understood that,’ Caroline said. ‘But why? Did we not agree that they would not suit, and that he was a very shady character?’

‘Yes, you might have said that,’ Charles said through a bite of his apple. ‘But Darcy reckoned there was nothing I could actually do.’

‘But – but – but he is horrible!’ Caroline said. ‘He is a great bore! He thinks about nothing but food, and cards!’

‘Then it is all for the better that you need not marry him,’ Charles said, continuing to eat his apple.

‘But Louisa hates him!’

‘She accepted him, though,’ Charles said.

‘Charles, how could you give them your consent?’

‘Well, as Darcy pointed out, Louisa is of age,’ Charles said, ‘and does not need my consent, so I could not give it. All I did was give them my blessing, and I dare say they would just as well get married without it.’

‘But such a man!’ Caroline exclaimed. ‘He is vile!’

‘I do not particularly like him either,’ Charles said, ‘but Darcy has made enquiries about him, and his finances and his reputation appear to be sound. Louisa is certainly old enough to make this decision, do you not think so, Caro?’

‘Yes, but, Charles -’ Caroline said. ‘I think Louisa is doing something very stupid, and perhaps even dangerous!’

‘She is old enough to decide that for herself!’ Charles said hotly.

‘I do not think she is acting out of her own free will,’ Caroline snapped. ‘What if he has some sort of hold over her and forced her into marriage?’

‘That – that is very far-fetched,’ Charles said. ‘I mean – you do not think that possible, do you?’
'Lord, Charles, I do not know,' Caroline said. ‘All I know is that I no longer know my sister.’

She sank onto the sofa next to him.

‘I feel as if I lost her, Charles,’ she said and tears rose into her eyes, ‘as if I lost both my sister and my best friend.’

Charles carelessly tossed the half-eaten apple onto the table and placed his arm around Caroline’s shoulders.

‘There, now, there,’ he muttered and allowed her to cry into his shoulder. ‘I am sure it is not quite that bad.’
Louisa Adjusts to Married Life

Louisa was completely and utterly bored. It was the third day of her honeymoon and so far, she had only been allowed out of their rooms twice, for a quick stroll down at the beach and then back to their rooms. Even the food was sent up at regular intervals, just like in a prison.

‘Can we please, please, go down to the beach?’ she asked her husband and shuddered at the thought that he was her husband. ‘Or the shops? Or anywhere?’

‘No,’ he said curtly and turned a page of his book. It was the third he was reading since their arrival.

‘But I am bored to death,’ Louisa said. ‘You said I could choose where we went, but for all that I have seen of the place, we might just as well have gone nowhere at all.’

‘We are on our honeymoon, Louisa dearest,’ her husband pointed out. ‘We are supposed to stay in our rooms and entertain ourselves.’

‘Lord, even that would be better than just sitting here doing nothing,’ Louisa said.

‘Well, it will not happen, so do not get excited,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Read a book.’

‘I do not have a book,’ Louisa said. ‘I had no idea we would be stuck indoors for days.’

‘Help yourself,’ her husband said and pointed at his suitcase full of books.

‘I see you came prepared,’ Louisa said through her teeth. ‘You might have told me you planned to stay in our room and read.’

‘Louisa, my dear, if I had known you did not read, I would never have married you,’ Mr Hurst said pleasantly.

‘Oh, yes, you would have,’ Louisa said. ‘You worthless son of -’

‘Actually, Louisa, you had better call me Algernon, now that we are married.’

‘Anything but that,’ Louisa snorted. ‘I am going down to the beach now and I do not care what you say.’

‘Well, enjoy yourself, my love,’ her husband said. ‘Take your umbrella. I see that it has begun to rain.’

‘Oh, very well, I will read a stupid book,’ Louisa said. ‘But you will take me down to the beach when the rain has stopped.’

The two weeks of her honeymoon passed agonisingly slow. Louisa read more about political philosophy than she ever cared to learn, and even made a foray into the one botanical work her husband had brought along. By the time they were sitting in the carriage that was to take them back to London and from there to Pemberley, Louisa would have given anything for a novel by Mrs Radcliffe.

They reached her brother’s house in time for dinner. It was there that they would take up residence should they find themselves in London, Louisa had been informed. She did not know whether her husband had any property in the city; before their marriage, he had lived in a hotel. Louisa had
expected to find the house deserted, her brother and sister already on their way to Pemberley, but instead she found them both sitting in the drawing-room, Charles writing letters and Caroline stitching listlessly at a sampler she had been working on for years.

‘Dearest, you look tired,’ Caroline said and embraced her sister. ‘How was your journey?’

‘Agreeable,’ Mr Hurst said before Louisa could answer. ‘We had cold meat for lunch.’

Caroline did not grace this with an answer.

‘I shall ring for tea directly,’ she said.

‘Forgive me, sister,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘I was under the impression that we were to meet not here but at Pemberley.’

‘Oh, yes,’ Caroline said. ‘There was a change in plans. There will be no trip to Pemberley in the near future. We will be stuck here all summer.’

‘But it was all arranged,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Oh, Mr Hurst, I am sure you will find someone with whom to play cards here as well,’ Caroline said testily.

‘Why did the plans change?’ Louisa asked, trying to step between her husband and her sister.

‘A family illness,’ Charles interjected. ‘Darcy wrote to tell me that his sister was taken quite ill at the sea and needed to recover at Pemberley, on doctor’s orders. He was ever so sorry, but she needs absolute quiet and rest and he feared he had to postpone our party.’

‘Are we to go then later this summer?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘We do not know,’ Caroline replied. ‘It is an illness, not something you can plan. We will have to wait for Miss Darcy to improve.’

‘In the meantime,’ Charles said, ‘I am going to take Caroline up to Scarborough. Would you and Louisa care to join us, Mr Hurst?’

‘That would be nice, would it not?’ Louisa said to her husband.

‘No, I have seen enough of the sea to last me for a life-time,’ Mr Hurst said gruffly. ‘We will remain in London.’

‘But my aunt lives in Scarborough,’ Louisa said. ‘I should love to see her again.’

‘We will not discuss this here, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said.

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‘Am I allowed to discuss your horrid behaviour now?’ Louisa asked when they were sitting before the fire in her bedroom later that evening, Mr Hurst having insisted on joining her for at least an hour before retreating to his own room.

‘What horrid behaviour?’ Mr Hurst asked, looking up from his book.

‘That you forbade me to see my family, for instance,’ Louisa said. ‘You said I would not suffer from this marriage. Well, I am suffering now!’
Mr Hurst sighed, marked the page he was reading and closed the book.

‘That was when I was under the impression that we would spend the summer at Pemberley,’ he said. ‘All promises I made regarding the length and conduct of our marriage depended on our spending the summer there. I have, I must admit, not calculated for this precise case.’

‘You are still going to die in November, though, are you?’ Louisa said.

‘Well, Louisa –’

‘If you have second thoughts about dying, I can help you there,’ Louisa said. ‘It would be my pleasure.’

‘Thank you ever so much, that will not be necessary,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Trust me, I will be as happy as can be to leave you for ever as soon as possible.’

‘And when will that be?’ Louisa insisted.

‘I cannot say now,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Pemberley was a crucial step in my plan.’

‘Your plan, your plan,’ Louisa mocked him. ‘What plan if I may ask? After all, it is my marriage that this plan formed.’

‘I cannot tell you, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘as I have told you often enough before.’

‘And still,’ Louisa said, ‘you expect me to do what you wish, without even telling me why. What if I simply left for Scarborough with Charles and Caroline? Would you come after me and cause a scandal when I refuse to come back to London with you?’

‘You would not cause a scandal, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘It would ruin your reputation for your second marriage.’

‘Who says I will want to marry again?’ Louisa snapped. ‘I can tell you, so far, I cannot see why anyone should care to get married. It is not at all recommendable. Besides, by the time I am ready to marry again, all scandal will be forgotten in the face of the gruesome death you will have suffered!’

‘At your hand, no doubt,’ her husband suggested.

‘If need be,’ Louisa said.

‘I offer you this compromise,’ her husband said. ‘We will stay in London for the time being. You are free to do whatever you like, visit whomever you like, go wherever you like in London, buy whatever you like. Deck yourself out with a complete new wardrobe, order furniture for Hurst Hall, buy yourself jewellery – I do not care. Tell them to send the bills to me and I will pay them.’

‘But I have to stay in London?’ Louisa asked.

‘Yes,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘And you will write to Miss Darcy tomorrow, telling her how awfully sorry you are not to see her this summer, and informing her about your best wishes for her recovery. It will be a long, feeling, kind letter, directly from your heart. She will know she always has a friend in you, no matter what. Is that clear?’

He made to leave the room, muttering to himself, ‘illness in the family – as if. I wish I knew what really happened at Ramsgate.’

‘Oh, very well,’ Louisa said. ‘I will accept your compromise. But you are not going to sleep here.’
‘Oh, heaven forbid,’ her husband said. ‘I could not tolerate another night with you. You snore.’

Louisa threw her shoe at him, but he had already closed the door.

Charles and Caroline left for Scarborough a couple of days later and Louisa and her husband found themselves alone in Charles’ house. They rarely saw each other during the day; Mr Hurst usually left the house before Louisa was up and returned only for dinner. He told the servants he was going to his club, and it was that which Louisa told anyone who asked, but she was not sure whether she believed him. Once or twice he had returned with his clothes in a dreadful state, and had blamed it on a fight in his club, but since he did not even name his club, Louisa guessed he did not want to be questioned about it. The evenings, they almost always spent together, much to Louisa’s annoyance. Mr Hurst would make polite conversation about the weather or incidents of note in the newspapers until the servants retreated, then he would retrieve the book he was currently reading from somewhere and not speak a word to her until they retired to bed. Louisa had noted that it was only when no one else could observe him that he actually read; if someone else was with them, he would spend his evenings pretending to sleep in front of the fire, or bullying people into playing cards with him. Occasionally, Mr Hurst would insist on spending an hour or two in her room before leaving for his own; at these times, Louisa would simply pretend he was not there and go about her night-time rituals as she pleased. She was not embarrassed by his presence. A fortnight of the closest possible proximity in Penzance had cured her of that.

‘So, how did you spend your day, my love?’ Mr Hurst asked over dinner, about three weeks after Charles and Caroline had left.

‘I bought books,’ Louisa announced. ‘They were delivered just before dinner, if you wish to have a look at them.’

‘You know I never read,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Waste of time, if you ask me. Where did you put them?’

‘They are in a box in the library,’ Louisa said. ‘They will be unpacked tomorrow.’

‘Good, they will be in nobody’s way there,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Excellent lamb, this. What did the cook do with it?’

It was only after the servants had left that the subject of the books was picked up again.

‘Why on earth did you buy books, Louisa?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘They are expensive,’ Louisa pointed out. ‘I told them to pack a box with their dullest and most expensive books, and have them delivered here, all expenses to be paid by you.’

‘Oh, I am sure I shall find something interesting among them,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Did your sister write to you today?’

‘You already seem to know she did,’ Louisa said, ‘so why do you ask?’

‘Does she mention Mr Darcy in any way?’ Mr Hurst enquired.

‘No, not really,’ Louisa recalled. ‘She only mentioned Pemberley in passing, but most of the letter is used up by tales of what she and my aunt and cousins did.’

‘That must be rectified,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘You will write to her and bring Mr Darcy back into her mind.’
‘I will do no such thing!’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘Mr Darcy does not care about her at all. It is better she sees that now, than that she makes herself a laughing-stock.’

‘Oh, people will forget about that in no time, do not you worry,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘But if she continues to pursue Mr Darcy, there is no better reason why we are associating with him.’

‘I do not even see why you want to associate with him,’ Louisa said. ‘When you are in his company, you hardly exchange three words, and he thinks you a frightful bore. Maybe if you actually talked to him, you would not need to exploit my poor sister.’

‘Ah, but he would notice me then, would he not?’ Mr Hurst asked. ‘And that would not do at all. No, Caroline should continue to pursue him. He would never tell her outright that she has no chance of succeeding, he thinks too much of his dignity for that. No, the only thing we have to worry about is him fancying himself in love with someone else and snubbing Caroline for the other lady’s sake.’

‘I will not use my sister as a pawn in your plays,’ Louisa cried.

‘Ah, Louisa, but think of the good things you will be able to do for your sister, once I am dead,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘You could offer her a home, for example, if she wishes to leave Charles. The profits from the estate are large enough to set up a house in town, too, if you like that better.’

‘Then why do we not get our own home?’ Louisa asked.

‘Well, it would hardly be worth the effort, considering I am going to die in a couple of months, would it not?’ Mr Hurst said, then returned to his book, which Louisa took as a signal that the conversation was ended.

‘It is only the thought of that happy, happy day that makes me tolerate the sight of you,’ she said through clenched teeth before she stomped out of the room and locked herself into her bedroom.

When Mr Hurst followed her up the stairs and heard the door to her room slam shut, he received a knowing look from the butler.

‘We should have gone to Ramsgate,’ Mr Hurst said after dinner a couple of days later. ‘Why on earth did we go to Penzance?’

‘I am sure the rooms in Ramsgate would have been much nicer than the ones in Penzance indeed,’ Louisa said sourly.

‘If only I had been at Ramsgate, I might have found out -’ Mr Hurst began.

‘You would have found nothing out from sitting in the room all day,’ Louisa muttered.

‘That reminds me,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘did Miss Darcy write?’

‘She sent a short note, thanking for my letter,’ Louisa said. ‘She was sorry we could not see each other this summer, but she was still not feeling well at all.’

‘Nothing else?’ Mr Hurst asked. ‘Nothing about her brother, or where he was?’

‘He is still at Pemberley, I presume,’ Louisa said. ‘Why do you not write to him and ask where he is?’

‘At Pemberley, you say,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I could have sworn I saw him just the other -’
‘Then maybe he is in town,’ Louisa said testily. ‘I do not care either way.’

At that moment, a footman entered bearing a note for Mr Hurst. It bore a magnificent seal and, upon seeing it, Mr Hurst ripped it open eagerly, frowned at reading its contents and then hastily left the room, muttering an excuse.

‘Who did you say sent that note?’ Louisa asked the footman when she went into the hall.

‘I could not say, madam,’ the footman replied. ‘I did not look at it.’

‘Well, who delivered it?’ Louisa insisted.

‘One of those urchins, madam,’ the footman said. ‘I gave him a penny and sent him away again.’

Just then, Mr Hurst came running back down the stairs.

‘I have to be gone, dearest,’ he said to Louisa.

‘Now?’ Louisa asked. ‘It is practically night-time.’

‘There appears to be an emergency at Hurst Hall,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I must leave at once.’

Without further ado, he was out of the door and gone.

‘Did he order the carriage?’ Louisa asked the footman.

‘No, madam,’ the footman replied. ‘I assume Mr Hurst will travel post, madam.’

‘If indeed he travels,’ Louisa muttered to herself as she went up to her room, ‘I suppose he has never set foot into Hurst Hall at all.’
Mr Hurst was still gone when Charles and Caroline returned from the North a couple of days later. A week after that, they received a note from Georgiana Darcy, informing them that she and her brother were back in town. Louisa was inclined to ignore this message, knowing that her still-absent husband would have wanted her to answer it. She did not, however, tell Caroline about her reservations and so Caroline sent a very pretty reply asking about Georgiana’s health. The very next day, Mr Darcy himself called on them. Louisa, still not in a mood to see him, claimed a headache and retired to her room, but Caroline received him. She asked about Georgiana’s health again and Mr Darcy assured her that Georgiana was better, if still not in a state to go out much.

‘The illness has made her very susceptible to certain frights and anxieties,’ Mr Darcy explained. ‘I think she needs to get away from everything and everyone for a while. I intend to send her to the North with my aunt.’

‘I could imagine that might suit her,’ Caroline said.

‘I do hope so,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘My aunt is visiting family in a rather remote part of the country; I hope Georgiana will profit from such a small circle of people.’

‘Please do give her my best wishes for a speedy recovery,’ Caroline said. ‘And if there is anything I can do for her -’

‘You are very kind,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘but there is not much that can be done at the moment, I am afraid.’

They sat in silence for a moment until Mr Darcy asked after Louisa’s health.

‘Oh, she is well enough, apart from that headache,’ Caroline said. ‘Only -’

She broke off. Mr Darcy looked at her expectantly.

‘You will keep this to yourself?’ Caroline asked.

‘Of course,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘You can trust me.’

‘I know,’ Caroline said. ‘To tell you the truth, I am a bit worried about Louisa. This whole business with Mr Hurst - it is really odd.’

‘This is indeed something that worries me myself. Before they got married, your brother did ask me if I could find out anything worrisome about Mr Hurst,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘But I could not find anything.’

‘Good,’ Caroline said, relieved. ‘So that means there is nothing wrong with him other than that he is a bore? I did wonder that you had advised Charles to sanction the match, but if you think that there is nothing to worry about -’

‘No, I meant, I could not find out anything about him,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘There are bank accounts in his name, he is a member of the clubs of which he said he was a member and he appears to have been telling the truth about the house he owns as well, but that is that.’

‘That is what?’ Caroline asked.
‘That is all,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Nobody in his clubs can recall ever meeting him. Nobody from either Oxford or Cambridge has ever heard his name in connection with one of the universities, and as far as I can tell, he has never been seen at one. Nobody to whom I spoke has ever seen him before the spring of this year, and no hostess can recall being introduced to him, nobody could recall ever having conducted business with him.’

Caroline was stunned at the extent of the research Mr Darcy had taken.

‘What can that mean?’ she asked.

‘It could mean nothing,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘It could mean that he simply spent all his life in a remote place, was educated privately or educated himself, maybe came into some money and decided to remove to London, where he met your sister and married her.’

‘Or -’ Caroline said.

‘Or, that there is a more sinister reason why a man of about thirty years who claims to be of good society has no connections whatsoever to it, and has never moved in it before,’ Mr Darcy finished for her. ‘At first I thought that he had maybe been in either the Navy or the Army and for some reason – maybe a slight irregularity – decided not to disclose this information, but nobody in either institution knows him, and I am fairly certain he has never worn those uniforms.’

‘He might have been in the Colonies and made his fortune there,’ Caroline suggested.

‘That is a possibility, of course,’ Mr Darcy agreed. ‘We cannot rule that out. It is entirely possible that he is keeping that quiet, because his background is not quite as good as he wishes us to believe and there is nothing worse.’

‘You seem to doubt it, though,’ Caroline said.

‘I do,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘For one thing, there would be no reason to keep something like that even from his closest connections. Also – and this is a feeling that some others with whom I spoke had as well – I feel I have seen him before, years ago – but if I did, his name was most definitely not Hurst.’

‘What was it then?’ Caroline asked eagerly.

‘If only I could say,’ Mr Darcy sighed. ‘Maybe I am not even right, maybe I only saw someone of whom he now reminds me. This is rather fanciful, but do you not think that in his face, there is a certain similarity to -’

He broke off.

‘No, I will not speculate,’ he said. ‘It may well be he has indeed a connection to that family, however distant, without there being anything wrong about that.’

‘I think I know to whom you are referring,’ Caroline said. ‘I had thought so too for a fleeting moment. But if he was related to them, certainly that would not be anything to keep quiet? Quite the contrary, in fact.’

Mr Darcy shrugged.

‘There are simply too many suspicious circumstances,’ he said. ‘One or two can always be explained, but these many must raise questions. I can assure you, if I hear anything further, I will let Charles and you know. In the meantime, you had perhaps keep an eye on your sister. Mr Hurst is not in town, I gather?’
‘I could not say,’ Caroline said. ‘All Louisa said was that he had been called away on business reasons, but she would not say where or when he would return. Do you think she is in any danger, Mr Darcy?’

‘I do not think so, not at the moment,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘However, just in case – you would not happen to know if Mr Hurst stood to expect anything if Louisa suddenly died?’

‘That is the oddest thing,’ Caroline said. ‘I do not know all the technical details, but I do know that in that case, Mr Hurst would get nothing apart from a very small interest. All Louisa’s money is tied up in some way or other that would make it impossible for him to access it.’

‘That is odd,’ Mr Darcy agreed.

‘Particularly because, when Mr Hurst dies,’ Caroline continued, ‘Louisa will inherit more or less everything.’

‘That is even odder,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘I have been worrying about her doing something rash, Mr Darcy,’ Caroline confessed. ‘She has been ordering mourning clothes in the finest materials, and when I asked her why, she said one never knew when one would need them. That is not normal behaviour, is it?’

‘No, not entirely,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Do not worry, Miss Bingley, I will try to find out as much as I can, and I will let you know what I find.’

‘Mr Darcy,’ Caroline cried out when he was about to leave, ‘why did you tell Charles to give them his blessing?’

‘Because,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘there was nothing Charles could have done about it all, as I told him, and I thought it unwise to risk an estrangement in your family.’

Mr Hurst returned three days later. He interrupted the Bingleys at the breakfast table. When asked about his trip, he would not say where he had been, apart from that he had been called away on urgent business somewhere in the North, and that it would be far too boring to trouble them with the details. As soon as possible, he excused himself in order to retreat to his rooms and change out of his travelling clothes, which were rather crumpled and stained. Louisa followed him upstairs and soon after, Caroline excused herself as well, leaving her brother to read his post with a rather bemused expression.

‘Actually, Caroline, this one is from Darcy, saying -’ he began, but Caroline was already out of the room.

Caroline tried to climb the stairs as noiselessly as possible and arrived in front of Mr Hurst’s door without alerting anybody to her presence. From the voices within the room, she gathered that Louisa had joined her husband. Checking that nobody was in the corridor, Caroline ripped a couple of pins out of her hair and threw them onto the floor, so that she could pretend to be looking for them if she was found out, then knelt on the carpet and pressed her ear to the keyhole.

‘- not as if I was interested in the slightest in your doings,’ Louisa was just now saying, ‘but consider how embarrassing the situation was for me. You could at least have -’

‘For heaven’s sake, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said shortly. ‘Are you not clever enough to make something up?’
'I told them you were away on business, as you said,’ Louisa said. ‘I could not supply any details because you did not give me any.’

‘But did anybody get suspicious about my absence?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘Oh, please,’ Louisa scoffed. ‘As if anybody, including myself, could care that much about where you were. Frankly, I am counting the days until somebody accidentally runs you over with his carriage, or whatever way else you see fit to remove yourself from my life.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘What about Mr Darcy? Have you made any progress there?’

Caroline raised an eyebrow.

‘Have I made any progress there?’ Louisa asked. ‘Why, you should have said that you wanted me to throw myself at Mr Darcy. Shall I sneak into his bedroom this night or tomorrow?’

Caroline blushed.

‘I dare say it might be a nice change,’ Louisa now continued, ‘he would certainly be far livelier company than you are.’

‘Forget it, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst was now saying, ‘your offer is, as I have told you before, not tempting to me.’

Caroline was blushing even more fervently.

‘Oh, pah,’ Louisa said. ‘As if I would agree to anything like that.’

‘Why, I had that impression just now,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘But enough of those pleasant nothings – what about Mr Darcy?’

‘What about him?’ Louisa snapped.

‘Is he still on as good a footing with your family as before?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘Why should I care?’ Louisa exclaimed.

‘Because, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘I have told you, the sooner I succeed, the sooner you will be rid of me. And I told you before, Mr Darcy is essential to my success -’

‘Oh, very well,’ Louisa said, ‘I’ll see what I can do – but I do not like it.’

‘Nobody said you had to,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Now, I am going to take a bath. You are of course welcome to stay, but remember, no untoward behaviour -’

‘No, thank you,’ Louisa said and Caroline could hear footsteps.

Foregoing her hairpins, she hastily slipped into her own room across the hall.

The next morning, Caroline received a note from Georgiana Darcy over breakfast.

‘Her brother and her cousin are taking her out for a drive today,’ she told her siblings, ‘and she wonders whether I might like to join them. Her new companion, a Mrs Annesley, is coming as well. She is a very charming lady, or so Georgiana writes.’
‘Georgiana Darcy has a new companion?’ Mr Hurst, looking up from his bacon, asked.

‘Did you know her old one?’ Caroline asked back.

‘Oh, I was only wondering,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Seems a very sudden step –’

‘I am sure the Darcys had their reasons,’ Caroline snapped. ‘None of which are any business of ours.’

‘Be that as it may,’ Mr Hurst said, finishing his bacon. ‘I have got to go now, I have important business waiting for me.’

As soon as he had left the room, Louisa stood up as well.

‘Yes, I have to leave too,’ she said. ‘There are so many things I need to do today.’

‘Oh,’ Caroline said. ‘I thought you might join Georgiana and me for our ride –’

‘I would love to,’ Louisa said, ‘but I simply cannot spare the time. I shall see you later.’

With that, she was gone.

‘What is it she needs to do?’ Charles asked his sister.

‘I can tell you I have no idea,’ Caroline said. ‘I hope she is not in any sort of trouble.’

‘Do you think that likely?’ Charles asked.

‘Honestly, I have no idea,’ Caroline said. ‘Anything I can think of, sounds completely far-fetched to me, but then, Louisa is behaving so very oddly –’

‘She seems a bit distant,’ Charles agreed. ‘I mean, she and I were never that close, but –’

‘Yes, I know,’ Caroline said. ‘It is as if we were living together with a stranger.’

‘Maybe she is just adjusting to being married,’ Charles suggested.

‘She had enough time to adjust,’ Caroline said. ‘I had hoped she would be her old self when we returned from Scarborough, but she is just as she was before we went.’

‘Speaking of Scarborough,’ Charles said, ‘did you answer that letter from our aunt?’

‘Yes, I wrote it last night,’ Caroline said. ‘I left it on your desk so you can scrawl a few words underneath it – try to write legibly, will you?’

When the Darcys arrived, it was with two carriages. In one, driven by Mr Darcy, Georgiana and a middle-aged lady with a pleasant smile were seated; the other was driven by Mr Darcy’s cousin, a Colonel Fitzwilliam, whom Caroline knew slightly.

‘Oh, dear, I am afraid we shall be very tight in my carriage if you join us, Miss Bingley,’ Mr Darcy said after the usual greetings.

‘Would you care to drive with me, Miss Bingley?’ the Colonel said. ‘I promise I am a safe driver.’

‘He is, you know,’ Miss Darcy said softly.
Caroline had the feeling that all this had been painfully orchestrated and offered no resistance to being helped into Colonel Fitzwilliam’s carriage.

‘I must apologise, Miss Bingley,’ the Colonel said when they were on their way to the park, ‘I specifically asked my cousin to arrange this little meeting with you.’

Caroline mustered him, but did not speak.

‘Do not fear, it is for no match-making purpose,’ the Colonel assured her. ‘No, it is far more pleasant – it is a matter of espionage.’

‘Espionage?’ Caroline repeated.

‘Indeed,’ the Colonel said. ‘Exciting, is it not?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You may have thought, Miss Bingley, that I am simply one of countless Colonels in His Majesty’s Army –’

Caroline silently agreed.

‘- However, I assure you that that is not the case,’ the Colonel said. ‘I am, rather, involved in a much more secret organisation – well, I will not bother you with the particulars. Suffice it to say that my cousin told me all you told him about Mr Hurst’s unusual behaviour and I found it interesting enough to warrant further research. And that, Miss Bingley, is where you come into play.’

‘I?’

‘Do you not realise, Miss Bingley, that nobody is as well suited to further this research on the person calling himself Hurst as you are?’ the Colonel asked.

‘I had not given it much thought,’ Caroline admitted, still very much surprised. ‘But there is perhaps something else you should know. A new development, so to speak.’

She thought she was getting the hang of this espionage business. It certainly was more interesting than covering screens. She informed the Colonel about the discussion between Louisa and Mr Hurst which she had overheard the previous morning.

‘Suspicious, very suspicious indeed,’ the Colonel agreed.

‘But what could they want from your cousin?’ Caroline asked.

‘I have no idea,’ the Colonel said. ‘But we are going to find that out.’

‘How so?’ Caroline asked.

‘Elementary, my dear,’ the Colonel said. ‘It appears that your sister will try to get close to my cousin, so you will do the same.’

‘I will do what?’ Caroline asked.

‘You will appear to be trying to secure the hand of my cousin,’ the Colonel explained. ‘To have an excuse to be constantly around him, so as to avoid your sister to succeed in her plans.’

‘But -’
‘Do not worry, if the worst should happen, my cousin shall be prepared to do the honourable thing and marry you.’

‘But I do not want’ Caroline began, then reconsidered making these admissions. Instead, she asked, ‘But would it not make more sense to let Louisa try whatever she wants to do and observe her secretly?’

‘It would,’ the Colonel agreed, ‘if we had any clue what they are planning. Unfortunately, we do not know. We must force them into the open. Therefore, Louisa must fail.’

‘And you really think that this matter is important enough to warrant all this?’ Caroline asked.

‘I do,’ the Colonel said. ‘I am sorry, I cannot explain, but believe me, it is important enough.’

‘I understand,’ Caroline said. ‘Very well. I will do what I can.’

‘Good girl,’ the Colonel said and grinned. ‘You can contact me via Georgiana any time you need.’

Louisa, meanwhile, was following her husband through the streets of London. He had walked all the way from Grosvenor Square to the old city; thankfully, not too fast, so Louisa could not lose him. They were now in a narrow lane somewhere near Cheapside – Louisa had long lost her way – and Mr Hurst was entering a rather dingy-looking house through a back-door. Louisa waited for a moment to see whether he would return immediately. When it became clear he would not, she quickly crossed the street and inspected the house. There was nothing about it that would indicate its purpose; the curtains in the narrow windows were drawn and there was no name given. Louisa wondered whether she should try to find the house’s front entrance and see if she could find out more, but then, she noticed that the door through which her husband had entered was not properly closed and it was easy to follow him. She hesitated for a moment, then her curiosity got the better of her and, making sure nobody in the street was paying her any attention, she went inside.

The door opened into a long, narrow corridor, with doors opening left and right. Everything was quiet and she could not tell who or what was in any of the rooms. Thus, she followed the corridor, to see if she could find any trace of her husband. At the end of the corridor, about half a dozen of stairs led into another, grander, corridor, at the end of which she could see the door which she presumed to be the front entrance. A flight of stairs led upstairs and at both her sides, there were doors, probably to the salons. The establishment seemed rather comfortable, judging by the quality of the wall-paper and the carpets, and she wondered that no servant, male or female, was in sight or could be heard. Carefully, she looked around and was just about to listen at one of the keyholes when she heard a man laughing upstairs. She had never heard her husband laugh, but she presumed it would sound similar, so she made her way up the carpeted stairs. More closed doors were leading from the upstairs corridor, but one stood ajar, and the laughter seemed to come from there. Louisa braced herself and walked towards it. There was still no servant in sight so she risked a peek through the gap.

The first thing she saw was her husband’s back, covered only by a shirt, stepping towards a four-poster bed. Louisa could not help grinning; all this to-do, then, was because of another woman, probably married. She wondered if Mr Darcy too had had an interest in the lady; it would certainly explain her husband’s obsession with the gentleman.
Louisa Makes A Discovery

Louisa was about to make her way downstairs again when there was more laughter behind the door and a man said, ‘Christian, lover, will you close the door? There is a nastily cold draught coming in.’

Louisa froze in shock. She could not move, even though she knew her husband would be at that door in mere seconds. She hoped he would not see her because she had no idea how to react. Her first instinct was to scream, but she could not make any sound, and she was not sure who would hear her.

It was too late, she heard bare feet traipsing over the carpet, more laughter inside the room, someone behind the door and -

‘Louisa?’

She still could not move. She simply stood there, staring at her shirt-sleeved, barefooted husband and the equally undressed man on the bed beyond.

‘Louisa, what on earth – what are you – oh, come on in then, or somebody might see you.’

He grabbed her roughly by the wrist and pulled her inside the room, placing her on a chair and then assembling his strewn clothing, trying to dress again. The other man followed his suit. Finally, Louisa found her voice again.

‘I followed you here,’ she said tonelessly.

‘That was rather naughty of you, was it not?’ her husband said, standing in front of the mirror tying his cravat.

The other man was attempting to put on his waistcoat, but his fingers were shaking so much he could not close the buttons.

‘It is – it is against the law,’ Louisa muttered.

‘Yes, I fear so,’ her husband said. ‘That was why I was hoping for some privacy.’

‘But it is a crime,’ Louisa said. ‘How could you?’

‘I could now say it was love,’ her husband said, ‘but that would sound rather trite, would it not, and be hardly to the point. Will you let me finish my cravat before you call the magistrate?’

‘Love?’ Louisa muttered.

‘If I am going to the gallows for it,’ her husband said, ‘I might just as well be honest about it.’

‘I think I am going to faint,’ Louisa mumbled.

Then, everything turned black.

When she came to again, her husband was waving a burnt feather under her nose.

‘Pour her a glass, Matthew, will you,’ he said and the other man pressed a glass into her hand.

She took a sip and found that it was brandy, burning in her throat.
'Take another sip, Louisa, there is a good girl,’ her husband said. ‘I thought we had lost you for a moment.’

‘That would have solved your problems, would it not?’ Louisa said weakly.

‘Some of them, yes,’ her husband admitted, ‘but it might have created others. I assure you though, we were sorely tempted, but then we decided to do the honourable thing and call you back to life.’

Glass shattered and both Louisa and her husband turned their eyes towards the young man called Matthew, who had dropped one of the brandy glasses with which he had been fumbling.

‘Everything alright?’ Mr Hurst asked, then, upon seeing the expression on the other man’s face, he said, ‘Matthew, love, what is it?’

‘How can you quip in such a situation?’ Matthew cried, collapsing on a chair.

‘How can I not quip in such a situation?’ Mr Hurst said lightly, but he walked over to the other man and pressed his shoulder. ‘If Louisa is determined to go to the magistrate, she will do so regardless of what I do.’

Matthew said nothing and Louisa thought that he looked rather green in the face by now. Mr Hurst seemed to have noticed that as well for he pressed another glass of brandy into his hands.

‘There, drink that,’ he said. ‘Better yet, drink the whole bottle, then you will not notice when they come to get us.’

With his hand still on Matthew’s shoulder, he turned to Louisa again.

‘Well, then, my dear,’ he said lightly, ‘what are you going to do? Are you going to go straight to the magistrate or will you offer us an honourable way out? There should be a case of duelling pistols downstairs, if I remember correctly.’

Matthew reached for Mr Hurst’s hand on his shoulder and Mr Hurst covered his hand with his other.

‘I – I would not do that,’ Louisa spluttered.

‘Of course, of course,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘The scandal. Of course, there will probably be a scandal either way, but still, it is a crime -’

‘Oh, do not be silly,’ Louisa snapped, not knowing where precisely this came from. ‘I am not going to rat you out, so can we please talk about this like normal people?’

‘You are not going to go to the magistrate?’ Matthew asked, looking a bit less green.

‘No, I am not, Mr – eh -’ Louisa said. ‘I am sorry, we have not been introduced yet.’

‘I thought you wanted to talk about this without flippancy,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘So, then, let us be frank. What do you want, Louisa?’

‘It is simple, really,’ Louisa said, as lightly as her husband before. ‘The plan.’

‘The plan?’ Mr Hurst asked, confused.

‘The plan,’ Louisa repeated. ‘The plan which you are following for reasons I cannot understand. The plan which has you behave so ridiculously about Mr Darcy.’
‘What about it?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘I want to know it,’ Louisa said. ‘Every detail, every tiny bit, every backstory. I want to know everything.’

‘And then?’

‘And then I will decide whether I want to be part of it or not,’ Louisa said firmly and got up.

Still shaking slightly, Matthew stood up.

‘Very well, I think I will go back home now,’ Louisa said. ‘Are you coming, Christian?’

‘I – yes, of course, I am coming,’ Mr Hurst said.

He pressed Matthew’s shoulder a last time and followed his wife out of the room.

‘Oh, before I forget, sir,’ Louisa said, turning back on the doorstep, ‘please do call upon me or my husband whenever suits you, I would love to meet you properly.’

The cab had almost left Fleet Street by the time Mr Hurst finally spoke.

‘Thank you, Louisa,’ he said softly. ‘Thank you.’

‘How long?’ Louisa asked.

‘About six, maybe seven years,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Only him?’ Louisa asked.

‘Only ever him,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘All this –’ Louisa said, ‘all this risk, the secrecy, all the – was it worth that?’

‘Worth every single damn thing,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Did you marry me because of this?’ Louisa asked.

‘My dear Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘lovely as you are, I would have never married had it not been necessary for the plan.’

‘The plan,’ Louisa repeated.

‘The plan,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘about which I will tell you all once we are home.’

Caroline received another note from Miss Darcy in the evening. Miss Darcy, it appeared, had enjoyed their driving out together, briefly though she had seen Caroline. She asked Caroline to accompany them again the next morning. Inside Miss Darcy’s letter, a small note was tucked.

Miss Bingley – it read – forgive me for contacting you in this manner, but be assured of my cousin’s discretion. I am writing to you because I need further information from you about any place that you think your brother (that is, Mr Hurst) could be frequenting. I just feel that there is something obvious of which we have not thought, something so trivial you possibly did not think would have any relevance.
I shall see you again in the morrow, unless I am detained, in which case you can tell Darcy anything you would tell me.

Your servant, etc.

Caroline read the note again and frowned. If the Colonel could not give her any hint just what he was looking for, she had no idea how she was to know. She would not be able to tell the Colonel anything new when she saw him on the morrow. She only hoped it did not mean she was a failure at being a spy, but even though she had closely observed Louisa and her husband all evening, she had not noted anything. Unless, perhaps, one counted that Mr Hurst had been in Louisa’s room now for over two hours, which was rather longer than usual. But no, she could not tell the Colonel that, she mused, and anyway, it could not have any significance. The Colonel would have to wait a little longer until he found out more.

The next morning, Caroline was again driving out with Miss Darcy and her guardians and Louisa was alone at home when the butler brought her a visitor’s card.

‘Yes, I am at home,’ Louisa told him and was not sure why she suddenly felt nervous.

Hastily, she cleared away a few things until her visitor was announced.

‘The Hon. Matthew Aldridge, B.D.,” she said when they were alone. ‘So that is your name.’

‘I am afraid it is,’ he said. ‘Thank you for seeing me, err -’

‘Mrs Hurst,’ Louisa aided him. ‘Do sit down, Mr Aldridge.’

Mr Aldridge sat down and Louisa had now time to look at him properly. The day before, all she had noticed was the fact that he was a man, and she could not even have described him afterwards, but now she took care to memorise his features. He was about her husband’s age, perhaps a few years his junior, and had an open and pleasing countenance. His hair was flaxen and carefully unkempt after the latest fashion and his clothes were clearly expensive, highly fashionable and very well cut. Louisa was particularly impressed by his neck-cloth, which was tied in a style she had never before seen carried out so well.

‘Impressive, is it not?’ Mr Aldridge asked, noticing her gaze. ‘It took me the best part of an hour to achieve it, and I believe I ruined half a dozen of them in the process, but I desperately wanted to make a good impression on you.’

He laughed rather forcedly, then clapped his hands together and looked at Louisa again.

‘This is rather awkward, is it not?’ he said.

‘Very,’ Louisa agreed.

‘I thought I had better come as soon as possible,’ Mr Aldridge explained, ‘so that we could get it over with at once.’

‘Over with what?’ Louisa asked.

She liked Mr Aldridge much better than the previous day, when he had appeared rather colourless and nervous.

‘I thought you might want to ask me things,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘I figured I – we – owed you some
‘I – I do not think I have any questions,’ Louisa said. ‘Not at the moment. Is there anything you might like to ask me?’

‘Oh, no,’ Mr Aldridge said, ‘Christian has told me so much about you.’

‘I think,’ Louisa said slowly, ‘we are supposed to refer to him as Algernon.’

‘Right,’ Mr Aldridge said and grinned. ‘Algernon. Dear old Algie. He is not here at the moment, is he?’

‘No, he went to his club,’ Louisa replied automatically. ‘That is to say, he went out early this morning, I am not sure where, but he said he would be back by late afternoon.’

Mr Aldridge grinned again. ‘His club, eh?’

Louisa shrugged. ‘That is what he used to tell me before yesterday.’

‘I do not know that Algie ever set so much as a foot inside a club,’ Mr Aldridge said.

‘He is very fond of his club,’ Louisa said earnestly. ‘At least, people there know to value a good game of cards.’

‘Quite so, Louisa,’ Mr Aldridge said just as earnestly. ‘I am sorry, Mrs Hurst, I mean. It is only – he always talks about Louisa.’

‘In view of the fact that Mrs Hurst is a complete fraud,’ Louisa said, ‘you could just as well say Louisa, Mr Aldridge.’

‘Matthew,’ Mr Aldridge said and held out his hand, shaking hers when she gave it to him. ‘I cannot say this is not weird, but it is definitely a pleasure to finally meet you.’

‘Actually, I am almost relieved I met you,’ Louisa said. ‘At least, this shows that Christian has a human side too. Algernon, I mean.’

‘Yes, he does his utmost to hide that, does he not?’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘All those books about political philosophy, for one thing.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Louisa said. ‘Two weeks in Penzance and all he had packed were those books! I cannot tell you how happy I was when I found a botanical guide to Southern England per chance.’

‘That would have been mine,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘I believe it must have landed amongst his books by accident.’

‘Does he never read novels?’ Louisa asked.

‘Never,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘He thinks them a waste of time and space. I say, Louisa, I know an awfully nice teashop – would you care to take an excursion there?’

‘Mrs Miggins’ tea-room,’ Louisa groaned when they had got there. ‘I should have known.’

‘Oh, you were here before?’ Mr Aldridge said, obviously slightly disappointed.

‘Algernon took me here once,’ Louisa said. ‘When he proposed to me, or rather, when he
blackmailed me into marrying him.’

‘Dear old Algie,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘Always the complete romantic.’

‘So, the teashop, it is good?’ Louisa asked. ‘I must say the last time I was here, I hardly noticed anything of the food.’

‘It is divine,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘And Mrs Miggins is an old friend. She is very discreet. Algie and I used to come here a lot.’

Mrs Miggins indeed greeted Mr Aldridge like an old friend and showed them both to a table in a corner in the room.

‘Just bring whatever is best today,’ Mr Aldridge said, ‘and a large pot of tea, unless you had rather have something else, Louisa?’

‘No, I will have what you have,’ Louisa said.

The tea came promptly, together with a selection of scones, muffins, crumpets and cakes, all of them looking delicious.

‘You must try those,’ Mr Aldridge said, helping himself to a cupcake. ‘I could die for Mrs Miggins’ cupcakes.’

‘Oh! Delightful!’ Louisa said with a full mouth when she had taken a bite. ‘Oh, what is in there?’

‘I have no idea,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘And I probably do not want to know. It will be something completely disgusting.’

‘Probably,’ Louisa agreed and took another cupcake.

‘There is one other thing I wanted to say,’ Mr Aldridge said, suddenly serious.

‘Yes?’

‘I want you to know,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘This thing with Christian and me – it is not just a thing, you know. It is meant to be forever.’

‘Really?’ Louisa asked, surprised.

‘I have never been more certain of anything in my life,’ Mr Aldridge said, ‘and neither, I think, has Christian. Darling Algie, I should say.’

‘How can you be so certain?’ Louisa asked. ‘I am sorry, I do not mean to pry – only -’

‘I have no idea,’ Mr Aldridge shrugged. ‘I just know it. There are no guarantees of course, but -’

‘How did you meet?’ Louisa asked.

‘I literally just ran into him one day in Bond Street,’ Mr Aldridge said, ‘and somehow, I have not been able to get rid of him since.’

‘Did you know back then that you were – I mean, that you were a -’

‘A molly?’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘Goodness, no. And neither did Algernon. It took us quite by surprise, I can tell you.’
He looked Louisa straight into the eye.

‘It was horrible,’ he said. ‘It almost destroyed both of us. At one time I was close to letting myself get arrested and shipped to New South Wales just to be out of this country and away from him.’

Louisa knew not what to say.

‘I knew it was wrong,’ Mr Aldridge continued. ‘Everything I knew, everything I had learnt, everything I believed, all told me what I felt was wrong. I thought that I was undergoing a bizarre twist on the trials of Job – that I would be weighed in the balances and found wanting – I was afraid, terribly afraid of what would happen if I gave in to temptation – and yet, I could not – I would not, perhaps -’

He broke off and Louisa still did not know what to say.

‘You know, if you do not want to have that cupcake, I am going to claim it,’ Mr Aldridge said.

Louisa, relieved he had changed the topic, hastily grabbed the cupcake and placed it on her plate.

‘Only over my dead body,’ she said.

‘I see we are going to get along famously,’ Mr Aldridge said. ‘Splendid.’
‘I like Matthew,’ Louisa told her husband that evening.

‘So?’ her husband said. ‘So do I, if I may remind you.’

‘So,’ Louisa said, ‘if I did not like him, do you not think that would rather complicate things?’

‘It might, yes,’ her husband admitted. ‘So I suppose I should be grateful that you approve of him?’

‘You could at least be pleased to hear it,’ Louisa said.

‘Very well then,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I am pleased to hear it. How did this come about, by the way? Did you look him up?’

‘He called on me,’ Louisa said. ‘He asked if I wanted him to explain anything, then he took me out for tea and overall, unlike some I could mention, he behaved very prettily.’

‘Indeed,’ said Mr Hurst.

‘Oh, you are insufferable!’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘I do not know what he sees in you!’

‘No, me neither,’ her husband said, much softer than before. ‘I suppose I simply was lucky.’

‘Oh, you cannot know how good it is to finally have someone to talk to,’ Matthew said to Louisa while they were waiting for their scones. ‘About Christian and all, I mean.’

‘There is nobody who knows but me?’ Louisa asked.

‘I think Mrs Miggins may suspect something,’ Matthew said, ‘but apart from that, no, there is nobody. It is not exactly something you tell people, is it?’

He sipped at his tea and Louisa wondered with how many lies he and Christian had had to live over the years.

‘I mean,’ Matthew continued, ‘I could hardly tell my mother and father about Christian, could I? I introduced him to them, of course, but as far as they are concerned, he is just a good friend -’

He broke off and stared into his cup.

‘Christian’s sister knew,’ he said. ‘She found out much the same way as you did, really.’

‘Poor girl,’ Louisa said. ‘Was she very shocked?’

‘Actually, no, not really,’ Matthew said. ‘She was quite sharp and had suspected something for quite some time. I never talked much with her – she was rather intimidating, to tell the truth – but she was great about it. Never mentioned it to anyone, not even her husband. Well, Christian was her baby brother, she wanted to protect him -’

‘You said she was,’ Louisa said softly. ‘Is she -’

‘Yes, she died,’ Matthew said. ‘Three – no, four years ago now.’
‘How?’ Louisa whispered.

‘In childbirth,’ Matthew said. ‘Something was wrong with the position of the child and they had to call for a surgeon. He tried everything, but the surgery was complicated and Lucie lost too much blood and – nothing could be done.’

‘And the child?’ Louisa asked.

‘A boy,’ Matthew said. ‘He lived. Lucie named him Christian before she died.’

He took another sip of his tea.

‘Christian was with her the whole time, you know,’ he said. ‘He would not leave her even though the surgeon and the midwife repeatedly tried to throw him out of the room.’

‘Where was Lucie’s husband?’ Louisa asked.

‘Overseas,’ Matthew said. ‘Making his fortune in the Caribbean from what I gather. He is still there, I hear. He left the boy with his parents and hardly saw him above twice in his life. Christian offered to take him, repeatedly, but to no avail.’

‘Christian wanted to raise the child?’ Louisa asked incredulously.

‘Oh, yes,’ Matthew said. ‘He would have done everything for Lucie. When his lawyer informed him that there was no way for him to get guardianship for the boy, that was what really broke him.’

He bit into his scone listlessly.

‘It took almost a year for him to get over that,’ he said. ‘It was very difficult with him. We went to Ireland – my father has property there, and he wanted me to play steward – and Christian would simply do nothing all day.’

‘Nothing?’ Louisa asked.

‘Nothing,’ Matthew said. ‘He would just sit in his room, staring out of the window – sometimes he would go walking for hours, without telling anyone. Other days, he would not even get out of bed -’

He broke off and stared at his scone.

‘The worst of it was that he would not talk,’ he said. ‘He would not speak to me. I was getting so frustrated with him, and I could not talk to anybody either. I tried to speak to a priest once, but I did not dare confide in him and I do not think he understood my problem.’

He put the scone back onto his plate.

‘I mean, I can understand that he did not want to speak about it,’ he said. ‘Everybody is different. I always want to speak about everything, but Christian does not. It frustrated me that he would not talk, but I understood. The problem was that I had nobody to talk to either because Christian always was the only one with whom I would talk. The only one with whom I could talk – about me, about us – about how it terrifies me at times -’

‘Did you never think about telling someone?’ Louisa asked.

‘I did, yes,’ Matthew said. ‘But I never knew how people would react, and I did not want to risk it. It is not only my secret, it is Christian’s as well. And so I remained silent, and said nothing, and lived with Christian not talking.’
‘And then?’ Louisa asked.

Matthew hesitated.

‘I am not sure Christian would want me to tell you,’ he said slowly. ‘He reached a – a sort of crisis. It was painful, very painful, for both of us, but in the end, it proved to be cathartic.’

He grinned awkwardly.

‘The longest, most intimidating, most terrifying, most wonderful three days of my life,’ he said.

A couple of days later, Caroline was invited to take tea with Miss Darcy and her guardians. As usual, the sandwiches were excellent, as well as the cupcakes specially delivered – the one thing the cook would not make herself – and Caroline graciously accepted the second helpings Miss Darcy pressed onto her.

The recent illness was still very visible in Miss Darcy’s face and demeanour; she was pale and rather nervous but she did her utmost to make her guest feel at ease. Caroline could not but admire Mrs Annesley, a true gentlewoman, who subtly guided Miss Darcy without it becoming obvious. She was a great improvement to the companion Miss Darcy had had before, Caroline thought, a rather extroverted lady, who had often seemed to forget her charge when conversing with guests. Mrs Annesley had her share of the conversation, it was true, but her participation was rather to ensure there were no awkward pauses or to even the way for Miss Darcy, and not to present herself.

When they were finished with the tea, Mrs Annesley, noticing the tired expression in Miss Darcy’s face, asked her young charge whether she would not like to retire, and Miss Darcy thankfully accepted after having earnestly begged for Caroline’s forgiveness.

‘Would you call my carriage?’ Caroline asked the Colonel when Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley had left the room.

‘I thought perhaps Darcy and I could walk you home,’ the Colonel suggested. ‘It is such a fine day and it is not very far. Besides -’

His expression told Caroline that they wanted to talk to her in private and she readily accepted.

‘Louisa has a new friend,’ she told them when they had left the house. ‘And Mr Hurst seems to be friends with him as well. A Mr Aldridge. He dined with us last night.’

‘Aldridge, Aldridge,’ Mr Darcy muttered. ‘If he is who I think he is, he is a rather decent young man. Good family. His father has property in Ireland and Aldridge was there for the last couple of years, managing it, if I recall correctly.’

Caroline described Mr Aldridge.

‘That would be him,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I know him but slightly, but he is very well-respected and liked. He stands to inherit quite a handsome fortune from his mother’s side of the family.’

‘Not the sort of person you would expect one of Mr Hurst’s ilk to associate with,’ the Colonel remarked. ‘I wonder if there is blackmail involved.’

‘Well, there were some rumours a couple of years ago,’ Mr Darcy acceeded. ‘I do not recall any particulars – actually, I do not think there ever were any particulars – someone apparently claimed to have seen Aldridge coming out of a locale with a certain reputation – but then, he was a very
untrustworthy source and nobody paid him any attention.’

‘Maybe our friend Hurst somehow came into additional information,’ the Colonel speculated.

‘What sort of locale would that be?’ Caroline asked, curious. ‘What reputation does it have?’

‘A very bad reputation,’ Mr Darcy said hastily. ‘Nothing that should be mentioned in gentle company.’

Caroline pouted.

‘Have you discovered anything else?’ the Colonel asked quickly.

‘Not really, no,’ Caroline said. ‘Only Louisa seems to be in a better mood lately.’

‘That does not sound too good,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘Not at all,’ the Colonel agreed.

‘We had better observe them closely,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘In that case,’ Caroline said, ‘you should perhaps come to dine with us today. I do not think Mr Aldridge is expected but I could throw myself at you over coffee, Mr Darcy.’

‘Why, that sounds like an excellent plan,’ the Colonel said. ‘Does it not, Darcy?’

‘We are dining with your mother tonight,’ Mr Darcy pointed out.

‘Oh, the mater will not mind,’ the Colonel said. ‘We shall send Georgiana to dine with her and Miss Bingley can expect us.’

‘If you insist,’ Mr Darcy said grumpily. ‘The Hursts will be there though, will they not? Otherwise, there would be no need for a spectacle.’

‘Oh, they will,’ Caroline said. ‘Shall I see you later then?’

They had reached the doorstep of her brother’s house so Mr Darcy and the Colonel promised to return later and then took their leave of her.

Inside, Caroline found her brothers and sister in the drawing-room. Louisa was reading a journal, Charles was penning a letter and Mr Hurst was snoring on a couch.

‘I have invited Mr Darcy and his cousin to dine with us,’ Caroline announced.

‘That sounds nice,’ Louisa said. ‘Which cousin?’

‘The Colonel,’ Caroline said. ‘Remember, Miss Darcy’s other guardian.’

‘Oh, right, him,’ Louisa said. ‘Completely penniless, was he not?’

‘He is quite charming though,’ Caroline said, then, remembering her instructions, added, ‘although of course nothing compared with dear Mr Darcy. He was particularly attentive towards me today, I must say.’

‘How nice,’ Louisa said, then lowered her voice and whispered, ‘So do you think there is hope after all?’
‘Who knows?’ Caroline whispered and winked. ‘He rather begged for an invitation though, that I can tell you.’

Mr Hurst woke with a start.

‘Mr Darcy?’ he asked. ‘He is coming to dine? Tonight?’

‘Yes, Mr Hurst,’ Caroline said. ‘He is coming just for you; he has been longing to see you.’

‘Excellent, excellent,’ Mr Hurst said, distracted.

‘Why, Caroline, I rather think he might come to see someone else,’ Louisa said and winked.

‘What is all this talk about Darcy?’ Charles asked. ‘What has he done?’

‘Nothing, Charles, nothing,’ Caroline said. ‘I invited him to dine with us tonight, that is all.’

‘Oh, I would not say that was all,’ Louisa said and giggled.

‘Oh, quite,’ Caroline said. ‘How could I forget!’

‘I wonder indeed how you could forget,’ Louisa said. ‘I thought it was especially important for you.’

‘Yes, Charles,’ Caroline said. ‘Mr Darcy’s cousin is coming as well. The Colonel. Do you remember him?’

‘I was not talking about that,’ Louisa muttered.

‘Colonel Fitzwilliam?’ Charles asked. ‘Have you set your cap at him now, Caro?’

‘No, of course not,’ Caroline said hastily. ‘I have set my cap at no one.’

‘Really no one?’ Louisa inquired.

‘Oh, you know,’ Caroline said.

‘Well, then,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘I think I forgot something at my club and must quickly go there before dinner. Louisa, could I talk to you for a minute?’

‘Of course, dear,’ Louisa said and followed her husband out of the room.

‘Is there anything I should know?’ Charles asked when they had left.

‘What?’ Caroline asked.

‘You are not really pursuing Colonel Fitzwilliam now, are you?’

‘Do not be silly, Charles, of course not,’ Caroline said and could not help blushing. ‘I merely appreciate his company.’

‘And Darcy?’ Charles asked. ‘You are not playing some game with him, are you?’

‘Oh, please,’ Caroline said.

‘I would not like for either of you to be hurt,’ Charles said.

‘Do not worry, we are all three of us fine,’ Caroline said.
‘You have been behaving just as oddly as Louisa lately,’ Charles said. ‘Are you quite sure everything is fine?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Caroline said. ‘Everything is fine.’

Charles did not seem convinced.

‘You can ask Darcy if you do not believe me,’ Caroline said. ‘He will tell you that there is nothing between us and that we are quite agreed about that.’

‘And Colonel Fitzwilliam?’ Charles asked.

Caroline said nothing.

‘I only want to see you happy, Caro,’ Charles said.

‘I know,’ Caroline said, ‘but there is no need to behave like my father.’

‘I know you are old enough,’ Charles said.

‘Older than you, actually,’ Caroline pointed out.

‘Older than me, in fact,’ Charles agreed, ‘look, Caro, if there is anything, you know you can come to me, do you not?’

‘Of course,’ Caroline said.

She kissed Charles on the nose and left the room.
The dinner went smoothly; the menu Caroline had selected was universally appreciated and the conversation centered on things of general interest such as the weather and recent news. Caroline took great care to keep her promise and flirted with Mr Darcy in what she personally thought was a rather shameless manner. She feared she would be too transparent, especially considering how Mr Darcy was wincing when he thought nobody was watching, but Louisa and Mr Hurst seemed to think her convincing enough. Charles, as usual, was rather oblivious to the niceties of the goings-on around him, and only complimented Caroline’s choice of pudding. After dinner, Caroline and Louisa retreated to one of the drawing rooms, leaving the gentlemen to their port. Caroline picked up her needlework and Louisa returned her attention to the fashion journal she had been reading earlier. The gentlemen, thankfully, did not linger long over port and joined them shortly.

‘Coffee, Mr Darcy?’ Caroline asked sweetly, remembering her promise from earlier on.

‘No, thank you,’ Mr Darcy said.

His cousin nudge him unobtrusively.

‘That is, in a moment perhaps if you do not mind,’ Mr Darcy added. ‘In the meantime, however, I want to ask you a favour.’

‘A favour, Mr Darcy?’ Caroline simpered, fluttering her eyelashes. ‘Oh, what could that be?’

‘I noticed a very fine landscape in your dining-room and I wondered if you could tell me more about it,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Perhaps my cousin and I could ask you some questions concerning the picture while we admire it together.’

‘Oh, certainly. I should love that,’ Caroline said, knowing perfectly well that there was no picture of a landscape in the dining-room. ‘Why do we not go there at once? Are you joining us, Colonel?’

She took the Colonel’s arm, gave Mr Darcy a broad smile for Louisa’s sake and allowed herself to be escorted back into the dining-room.

When the door had closed behind them, Louisa scurried over to her husband, who had settled himself on a sofa and assumed his usual position.

‘There is no landscape in the dining-room,’ she whispered into his ear.

‘Excellent, is it not?’ Mr Hurst whispered back. ‘We are making good progress. I think you were rather wrong in your assessment of your sister’s feeling, do you not think so, and maybe even Darcy’s, although it is hard to tell with him.’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake!’ Charles exclaimed and when they turned their heads towards him, they noticed that he had managed to spill ink over the cuffs of both his arms.

‘I only wanted to quickly jot down the directions on that letter, lest I forgot that before posting it,’ Charles said, ‘and now look at this. I shall have to go upstairs and change before I ruin everything.’

‘Yes, do, Charles,’ Louisa said.

‘What do you mean, excellent?’ Louisa asked when her brother had left them.
‘Well, apparently Caroline is doing her best at seeking Mr Darcy out,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘That is well.’

‘But it was Mr Darcy who sought Caroline out!’ Louisa pointed out. ‘And he took his cousin along with him.’

‘Yes, the cousin,’ Mr Hurst admitted. ‘He could pose a problem. Caroline seems to be rather fond of him, and he of her. We must not allow that to happen. You must take care of him.’

‘I?’ Louisa asked. ‘Why should I do that? I am pushing her towards Darcy, was not that the idea? Why do not you do it?’

‘Because, my dear -’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Oh, nothing.’

Anyway,’ Louisa said. ‘What about Mr Darcy? Why did he seek my sister out, instead of the other way round?’

‘As I said, maybe he is attracted to her after all,’ Mr Hurst suggested, ‘and your assessment of the situation was faulty.’

‘Yes, but, Algie,’ Louisa said. ‘After all you have told me about him, and what you suspect he is up to, should I really be happy that he appears to be genuinely interested in my sister?’

‘At least he is not French,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘He is as good as, if you are right!’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘I cannot allow him to prey on my sister.’

‘We must do our duty first,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Remember, Louisa, you promised me. We are at war, do not forget that. We all have to make personal sacrifices.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ Louisa said. ‘You the most of all, I do not forget that. Heaven forbid that I should forget your sacrifices.’

‘Well, then,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘see how much success you have with the Colonel, I will take a nap. So fatiguing, these dinners.’

He closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep when Charles rejoined them.

Caroline had stepped into the hall with her two companions. They heard plates ringing from the dining-room.

‘I think the library is empty,’ Caroline said and lead the way.

‘Well, then, Colonel,’ she said when they had settled themselves around the late Mr Bingley’s large writing desk, ‘how do you like my brother Mr Hurst, now that you have properly met him?’

‘I think he is queer,’ the Colonel said. ‘I cannot precisely say how, or why, but something about him strikes me as odd.’

‘He went to his club again this afternoon,’ Caroline reported, ‘just before dinner.’

‘Well, he never arrived there,’ the Colonel said, ‘for I was waiting there for him, just in case he should turn up, and I did not see him.’

‘He has several clubs, has he not?’ Mr Darcy interjected.
‘Yes, but he has only ever turned up in one of them,’ the Colonel explained, ‘a rather dingy affair, if you ask me, rather more frequented by the more dubious elements.’

‘I gather you had no trouble securing membership?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘None at all,’ the Colonel said. ‘They do not ask for references or I would have asked you for one.’

‘So he goes to that one club?’ Mr Darcy said. ‘That is a new development.’

‘Well, he goes there only occasionally,’ the Colonel amended, ‘and only to meet other people – curiously though, apparently none of the men he was meeting matched the description of Aldridge Miss Bingley gave me.’

‘Aldridge, Aldridge,’ Mr Darcy muttered. ‘I cannot puzzle out his role in the whole affair. I looked him up at home and he is indeed who I thought he was – very respectable family.’

‘Even they can have bad eggs,’ the Colonel said.

‘As is proven time and again with you,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Seriously, though, I think I know him slightly from Cambridge – he came down a year or two before me – and he had the best of reputations. No gaming debts, no boundaries over-stepped with anyone, a great favourite with his tutors – he simply is not the person to have dealings with Mr Hurst.’

‘And yet, he has,’ the Colonel said. ‘We must find out more. Miss Bingley, would you mind dropping Mr Aldridge’s name in the conversation later on? Make it something very innocent and allow us to see Hurst’s and your sister’s reaction to his name. Maybe it is not Hurst after all but Mrs Hurst Aldridge is interested in.’

‘But would Mr Hurst meet this Mr Aldridge if he was interested in my sister?’ Caroline asked, who had until then followed the cousins’ exchange with rapt attention.

Mr Darcy shrugged.

‘Stranger things have happened,’ he said. ‘The two men may have come to an agreement regarding your sister.’

Caroline blushed.

‘Now, now, Darcy,’ the Colonel said, ‘you are over-whelming poor Miss Bingley with these new insights into our capital’s morals.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ Mr Darcy said stiffly, now blushing equally, ‘I forgot myself. It was not my intention to shock you, Miss Bingley.’

‘I am not shocked,’ Caroline lied. ‘I am not a child anymore.’

‘No, indeed,’ the Colonel said and chuckled.

Caroline ignored him.

‘Mr Darcy,’ she said instead, ‘how would you rate my efforts to throw myself at you so far? Have I been eager enough?’

‘Err -’

‘Did you not think my little maneuver with the salt bowl particularly clever?’
‘Err -’

‘Everybody must have thought I was touching your hand, must they not?’

‘Really, Miss Bingley -’ Mr Darcy said.

“ ‘You were brilliant, Miss Bingley,’ the Colonel interrupted him. ‘Absolutely magnificent. Keep up the good work. And now, shall we return to the drawing-room? It is time we proceeded. Miss Bingley, may I have your shawl?”

‘Whatever for?’ Caroline asked.

‘Whenever things inside there become to much for you,’ the Colonel explained, placing the shawl neatly on a chair, ‘you can claim to miss your shawl and come here. Or, you can ask me to retrieve it for you and then follow me because you recall it is not where you told me it was. I shall meet you here and whatever it is you need to tell me can be said then.’

‘Inspiring,’ Mr Darcy muttered. ‘Do you always use these tactics at parties?’

‘Only when I am bored,’ the Colonel said.

He offered his arm to Caroline and led her back into the drawing-room.

‘I was looking for you in the dining-room,’ Charles said when they returned, ‘but you were not there. Did you not want to look at a picture there?’

‘Uhm,’ Mr Darcy began, but Caroline cut him short.

‘It turned out that the picture Mr Darcy had been thinking about was not in the dining-room,’ she said, ‘so we figured he had to have seen it somewhere else in the house. We looked in the small salon, but he could not see it there either. So then we went into the study, but it was not there either. Lastly, we looked in the hall, but Mr Darcy could not find it there. So we concluded that he had not seen in our house at all.’

‘Inspiring,’ the Colonel muttered into Caroline’s ear.

‘Yes, indeed,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘I must have seen the picture somewhere else. If only I knew where it was.’

‘Do not worry, Mr Darcy,’ Louisa said, ‘it will come to you. Colonel, would you care for some coffee?’

‘Coffee would be great,’ the Colonel said. ‘Thank you very much, Mrs Hurst.’

‘Come over here with me,’ Louisa said, ‘I will pour you a cup.’

‘I would like some coffee as well,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘if it is not too much trouble.’

‘Of course not,’ Louisa purred, ‘Caroline, would you pour Mr Darcy some coffee while I serve the Colonel?’

‘What? Oh, of course,’ Caroline said, ‘come with me, Mr Darcy, and I will get you your coffee.’

‘Can I have coffee too,’ Charles asked, ‘or are you ladies too busy?’
‘Do not be silly, Charles,’ Caroline said. ‘There is enough coffee for everyone.’

‘Look, here, Colonel,’ Louisa said when she had filled the Colonel’s cup, ‘have a look at this screen my sister painted. Is it not extraordinarily well executed?’

She guided the Colonel through the room, away from Caroline and Mr Darcy, who were still at the coffee table.

‘Marvellous, is it not?’ Louisa said, pointing out a small detail on the screen.

‘Quite, quite,’ the Colonel said.

‘Louisa, do you think Mr Hurst would like some coffee too?’ Caroline asked.

Louisa spun around and saw Caroline standing at her elbow, a cup of coffee in her hands.

‘I am sorry, you were saying?’ Louisa said.

‘Mr Hurst, would he like a cup of coffee?’ Caroline repeated, indicating Louisa’s sleeping husband on the sofa.

‘Mr Hurst? Oh, no, no,’ Louisa said. ‘Let him sleep. I think Mr Darcy is not completely happy with his coffee, Caroline. Do not leave him unattended.’

‘Of course not,’ Caroline said. ‘I would not have Mr Darcy dissatisfied with my coffee.’

She strolled across the room again to join Mr Darcy but then turned around again.

‘I say, Louisa, did not Mr Aldridge want to join us tonight?’ she asked. ‘Or was that tomorrow?’

‘Mr Aldridge?’ Louisa said evenly. ‘I never invited him for tonight. Did you?’

‘Mr Aldridge!’ Mr Hurst exclaimed, sitting up. ‘What about him?’

‘Nothing, dear,’ Louisa said quickly, ‘you seem to have dozed off.’

‘Would you like some coffee, Mr Hurst?’ Caroline asked and pressed the cup she was still holding into Mr Hurst’s hands.

‘Caroline, I think Mr Darcy needs sugar for his coffee,’ Louisa said.

‘Of course, of course,’ Caroline muttered.

She turned to Mr Darcy again.

‘Sugar, dear Mr Darcy?’ she asked sweetly.

‘Colonel, have a look at this picture,’ Louisa purred, pulling the Colonel with her. ‘I think it completely fascinating. The two of us should have a closer look at it.’

‘Oh dear,’ Caroline said, ‘I think I left my shawl in the small salon. It is quite chilly here, is it not?’

‘Would you like me to get it for you, Miss Bingley?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Oh, would you?’ Caroline said. ‘I would be ever so grateful.’

‘But did you not still have your shawl with you when we stepped into the library?’ Mr Darcy asked
when his cousin had left the room.

‘Why, I believe you are right, Mr Darcy,’ Caroline said. ‘You are always such an astute observer. I had better tell the Colonel, he will never find it in the salon.’

She went straight into the library.

‘What is the matter, Miss Bingley?’ the Colonel, seated behind the desk, asked. ‘You seem a bit uneasy.’

‘Louisa! The nerve!’ Caroline exclaimed, pacing up and down in front of the desk.

‘Beg your pardon?’

‘Did you not see how she threw herself at you just now?’ Caroline cried. ‘First Mr Darcy, then Mr Aldridge, now you – what is the matter with that woman?’

‘Well, it pains me to tell you, Miss Bingley, but some married ladies –’

‘Yes, yes, I am aware of that,’ Caroline snapped. ‘But my own sister? And in such a way? She almost exposed herself!’

‘Did she now?’ the Colonel said. ‘I must confess I hardly noticed. She was rather pushing you into Darcy’s arms though, was she not?’

‘I did not notice,’ Caroline said, ‘I was too busy throwing myself at him.’

‘You were marvellous,’ the Colonel said, ‘one could almost have believed you really wanted to marry him.’

He looked her sharply into the eye.

‘I do not want to, though,’ Caroline said, withstanding his gaze. ‘Not anymore, in any case.’

The Colonel raised an eyebrow.

‘I have to admit I toyed with the idea once,’ Caroline said. ‘But I gave that up pretty quickly.’

‘You told your sister that?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Well, not in so many words,’ Caroline said, ‘but it was pretty clear.’

‘And still,’ the Colonel mused, ‘she seems to want you to succeed with him – when before, you said she had designs on him herself, from what you overheard.’

‘Designs which she now has on you,’ Caroline said.

‘That too,’ the Colonel said. ‘I cannot make it out.’

‘She was rather unfazed too, when I mentioned Mr Aldridge,’ Caroline said. ‘Did you see that?’

‘Too unfazed,’ the Colonel said, ‘and Mr Hurst seemed rather anxious about the matter. No, I simply cannot understand it. We shall have to continue our observations.’

‘Only if Louisa can keep her claws to herself,’ Caroline muttered under her breath.

‘I am sorry, I did not quite catch that,’ the Colonel said.
'Nothing,' Caroline said quickly.

'Very well, then let us return before they begin searching for us.'
When they returned to the drawing-room, Mr Hurst was still snoring on the sofa, Charles was still struggling with his letter and his coffee-cup and Louisa and Mr Darcy were sitting on the other sofa and talking.

‘No, actually,’ Mr Darcy was just saying, ‘I am going to leave town by the end of the week.’

‘Not for long, I hope?’ Louisa said. ‘We would all sorely miss you, would we not, Caroline?’

‘Of course,’ Caroline said, squeezing herself between her sister and Mr Darcy.

‘I will not stay away for longer than a month,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘Where are you going, then, Mr Darcy?’ Caroline asked.

She thought that as a fellow conspirator, she should have been informed about Mr Darcy’s plans.

‘I am accompanying my sister and my aunt to the North,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘As you may recall, I had intentions of sending her there with my aunt so that she could recover from her recent illness. My aunt has now decided they will leave by the end of the week and I will go with them and see them settle in. They will stay until Christmas, but I intend to be back in London by the end of September.’

‘Excellent,’ Charles said, looking up from his correspondence. ‘Then you can come to Hertfordshire with me.’

‘Hertfordshire?’ Mr Darcy said, frowning. ‘What do you want to do in Hertfordshire?’

‘I have been thinking about taking a house there,’ Charles said, ‘for the shooting-season at least, to see how country life suits me.’

‘But why Hertfordshire of all places?’ Mr Darcy asked. ‘I cannot recall anything about the county which particularly recommends it.’

‘I hear it is quite pleasant,’ Charles said, ‘and it is an easy distance from town if I should find it too boring.’

‘This is the first time I hear about this plan,’ Caroline said. ‘Could you not have mentioned it earlier?’

‘Well, I only conceived of it this week,’ Charles said. ‘You know, I have always thought about buying a house but I was unsure in which part of England to settle, and whether I should like it at all. So I decided I should lease a house first to see if it suited me. Right now, I am writing to a fellow someone recommended to see if he can send me some offers so I can find out how expensive it would be.’

‘Charles, do you have any idea about the technicalities of leasing a house?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘Not as such, no,’ Charles admitted, ‘but this fellow Watson is supposed to be a very honourable man.’

Mr Darcy groaned.

‘If you knew, Charles, how many men I have heard described as honourable, who have absconded with a substantial amount of money only a week later -.’
‘Also, Charles,’ Caroline pointed out, ‘if you leased a house in the country, there would be an estate to tend as well, would there not be?’

‘Yes, that,’ Charles said. ‘It cannot be too difficult to do that, can it? Although, I suppose, if Darcy were to come with me for perhaps a week or two, just to show me where to start -’

‘Oh, that is an excellent idea!’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘We could all go, could we not? What do you say, Algernon, dearest?’

Caroline snorted, but hastily pretended to be coughing.

‘Go what? Where?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘Charles is going to take a house in Hertfordshire in September,’ Louisa explained, ‘and he is going to take Mr Darcy with him so that Mr Darcy can show him how to run the estate. I said that it would be splendid for all of us to go, would it not? What do you think, Algernon, would not that be fabulous?’

‘September, eh?’ Mr Hurst asked, ‘Shooting season? I hear there is quite decent shooting in Hertfordshire, eh?’

‘I suppose so,’ Charles said.

‘Wonderful!’ Louisa said and clapped her hands. ‘Will not that be delightful if we all went to Hertfordshire? You must come as well, Colonel Fitzwilliam!’

‘I am afraid, ma’am,’ the Colonel said, ‘that I will be needed elsewhere, much to my regret.’

‘That is a pity,’ Caroline said, ‘it sounded so exciting, this party in Hertfordshire.’

‘You will come, though, Darcy, will you not?’ Charles asked earnestly.

‘Very well, then,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘I will come to Hertfordshire with you, Charles.’

‘Fantastic,’ Louisa said and clapped her hands. ‘The fun we will have! When did you say we were going, Charles?’

‘I do not know yet,’ Charles said. ‘I suppose I shall have to find a suitable property first and make all the necessary arrangements.’

‘Oh,’ Louisa pouted.

‘You know, Bingley,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘I cannot assist you in the search for a house, but I can give you the name of a man whom you can trust if you would rather not rely on that Watson fellow. He will explain all the details to you and if you tell him what kind of house you are searching, will be able to find something suitable.’

‘Oh, I suppose that could not hurt,’ Charles said.

‘That the time?’ Mr Hurst suddenly said. ‘Goodness, it is quite late, is it not? It has been very pleasant but I think I shall retire. Are you coming, Louisa, dearest?’

The Hursts took their leave of the rest of the party while Mr Darcy jotted down directions for Charles.
‘How was I then?’ Louisa asked when they were upstairs in her room.

‘Goodness, Louisa, are you drunk?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘No, should I be?’

‘If you are not, then could you perhaps curb your behaviour a little bit?’ Mr Hurst said. ‘You were close to sitting in the poor man’s lap at one point.’

‘But you said –’

‘I know what I said,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘and I admit that you tried very hard –’

‘- and I gathered some useful information –’

‘- and you gathered some very useful information,’ Mr Hurst agreed, ‘but please, could you perhaps be a little less direct the next time? I really do not want to have to challenge Darcy – or the Colonel.’

‘Still,’ Louisa said, ‘we know where Darcy is going for the next month and I have made sure that he is coming with us to Hertfordshire.’

‘And that was excellent work,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Here, have a cupcake.’

‘You know, I think I had better take this to the library before I lose it again,’ Charles said, indicating the paper with the directions. ‘I shall be right back.’

He closed the door behind himself.

‘Well, then,’ the Colonel said, ‘I gather you are off to Hertfordshire, Darcy.’

Mr Darcy grimaced.

‘Surely it cannot be as bad as that,’ Caroline said. ‘We shall have some fun, I wager.’

Mr Darcy groaned.

‘And if worse comes to to worst, you could always compromise me,’ Caroline said. ‘That would be bound to create some excitement.’

‘Heaven forbid!’ Mr Darcy exclaimed.

‘Good gracious, I was only joking,’ Caroline said. ‘I did not know I was that repulsive.’

‘Forgive me; it is not that you are repulsive, Miss Bingley, far from it, only –’

‘Yes, I know,’ Caroline said. ‘And ditto.’

‘You do know you will have to keep up your act while in Hertfordshire,’ the Colonel reminded them.

‘And looking forward to it,’ Caroline said. ‘Listen though, Colonel, I was wondering –’

‘Let us talk about it tomorrow,’ the Colonel whispered as Charles re-entered the room carrying Caroline’s shawl.

‘I found this under the desk in the library,’ Charles said. ‘I had been wondering why you had not had
‘Could I not at least tell Charles?’ Caroline asked the Colonel.

They were strolling through the park by themselves, having lost Lady Julia and her nursery-maid at a previous bend. The Colonel had made it a habit of his to call on Caroline almost every other day ever since Mr Darcy’s departure for the north. He was usually accompanied by his sister or an elderly aunt, who was completely deaf and thought Caroline was quite charming.

‘Your brother,’ the Colonel said, obviously choosing his words with care, ‘is a very admirable young man but silence, I fear, is not one of his greatest strengths.’

Caroline had to agree that this was true.

‘So, while I am sure he would be nothing if not supportive,’ the Colonel continued, ‘I am afraid the risk would be too great.’

‘You have a point there,’ Caroline said. ‘I only thought it might be nice to have someone else to discuss things with when I am in Hertfordshire.’

‘My cousin will be there,’ the Colonel said. ‘You know you can trust him.’

‘Yes, but,’ Caroline said, ‘when he is not in the right mood, he will not tell me anything unless I pressure him. Besides, it is awkward enough I have to pretend to be after him all the time – I need to be away from him.’

The Colonel said nothing; he only pressed Caroline’s hand, which lay in the crook of his arm.

‘Are you quite sure you cannot come with us?’ Caroline asked.

‘I am afraid not,’ the Colonel said. ‘You will be on your own, but I am sure you will do wonderfully. When do you leave?’

‘Oh, I still do not know,’ Caroline said. ‘Charles is talking of taking possession after Michaelmas but so far, he has not yet found a house that is acceptable. Charles of course wanted to take the very first one they saw but luckily, that man your cousin recommended put his foot down. From what I hear, it was nothing more than a converted cowshed but Charles of course thought it charming.’

‘So they are still looking for something?’ the Colonel asked.

‘They left for Hertfordshire again this morning,’ Caroline said, ‘and intend to return tomorrow or the day after.’

‘Have you heard anymore from Mr Hurst since he left town?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Well, Louisa had a letter this week,’ Caroline said, ‘but she only said he sent his regards, and the business in the North would take a while longer. She did not say where up North he was or what he was doing. I tried to find the letter, but I could not.’

‘Well, Darcy said he would have an open ear whilst up North,’ the Colonel said. ‘Maybe he will find out something about this Hurst Hall.’
‘Mr Aldridge came to see us yesterday,’ Caroline said. ‘Again.’

‘Anything interesting happening?’ the Colonel asked.

‘No, but they act as if they are both in on some big secret and I am not,’ Caroline said. ‘Whenever they think I am not listening, they make stupid jokes and they keep calling Mr Hurst dear old Algie.’

The Colonel shook his head.

‘Mr Aldridge has an impeccable character,’ he said, ‘I have made enquiries everywhere, and I have found nothing. I simply cannot fathom how he is involved in all this – unless it is your sister who attracts him.’

‘That is the oddest thing,’ Caroline said. ‘Neither he nor she behave like lovers, not even when they think they are alone. They are more like brother and sister, if you ask me, but I could swear Louisa has only known him for a couple of weeks.’

‘That is an idea though,’ the Colonel said. ‘Maybe Mr Aldridge is a figure from Louisa’s past, not Mr Hurst’s. Tell me, Miss Bingley, were you and your sister always together before she married?’

‘Mostly, yes,’ Caroline said. ‘We lived together in Charles’ house, we visited our aunt in Scarborough together, we were at school together – there only was that one term when I fell so ill at school and was sent to my aunt to recuperate – Louisa was at a school in Weymouth that term because they did not want to send her back to the old school.’

‘Did you go to that school in Weymouth as well?’ the Colonel asked.

‘No,’ Caroline said, ‘when I had recovered, they found a school for us that was not so very far from our aunt.’

‘So you never met your sister’s acquaintances from Weymouth?’

‘I do not think so,’ Caroline said. ‘I still have her old letters, I can see if she ever mentioned somebody.’

‘Please do,’ the Colonel said. ‘What year was that again?’

Caroline told him.

‘I shall see if I can find out anything about Mr Aldridge’s activities during that year,’ the Colonel said, ‘and whether they brought him close to Weymouth.’

‘There is your sister again,’ Caroline said. ‘I think you are to fly that kite now, as you promised half an hour ago.’

‘Well, then, madam,’ the Colonel said and bowed deeply, ‘I must honour that promise, painful though it is for me to part company with you.’

‘Do not be silly,’ Caroline said and fell into pace with Lady Julia.

When Caroline returned, Louisa was sitting in the drawing-room.

‘It is past four already,’ she said.

‘I know,’ Caroline said. ‘We lost track of the time; the weather was so fine. I hope you did not
‘Well, the footman only told me you had left with a gentleman,’ Louisa said. ‘Is Mr Darcy back in town?’

‘No, it was Colonel Fitzwilliam,’ Caroline said. ‘We went for a stroll in the park.’

Louisa raised an eyebrow.

‘Alone?’

‘Lady Julia and her children went with us,’ Caroline said.

‘I see.’

‘You were shopping?’ Caroline asked.

‘Oh, only some ribbons,’ Louisa said. ‘Nothing of particular interest.’

‘For your green gown?’ Caroline asked. ‘I thought you said you wanted to have it altered.’

‘No, only some for the burgundy one,’ Louisa said. ‘I could find nothing for the green.’

‘Yes, I always thought the shade was rather difficult,’ Caroline said. ‘It is just so between dark and light.’

Louisa did not answer immediately, but took up her fashion journal again.

‘Perhaps you could try some gold trimmings,’ Caroline suggested. ‘I think that might work.’

‘It might,’ Louisa said. ‘Colonel Fitzwilliam is rather charming, isn’t he not?’

‘Yes,’ Caroline answered, taken aback. ‘Yes, I suppose he is. He is certainly very easy to talk to.’

‘He has very friendly manners too,’ Louisa said.

‘Oh, certainly,’ Caroline agreed. ‘He behaves very nicely.’

‘It is a pity he is not the eldest son,’ Louisa said. ‘How much money does he make as an officer?’

‘I have no idea,’ Caroline said. ‘Not very much, I suppose.’

‘Has he any other income?’ Louisa asked.

‘I do not know,’ Caroline said. ‘Maybe his father -’

‘He will probably have to marry very rich,’ Louisa said. ‘Miss Darcy has a dowry of a thirty thousand, I hear. Nothing below that will do for the Colonel, I think. He is used to a certain standard of living, probably.’

‘I suppose you are right,’ Caroline said.

‘He is not like Mr Darcy,’ Louisa said. ‘Mr Darcy will always have a large enough income from Pemberley. He can marry where he chooses.’

‘That is true,’ Caroline said.
'I do have to say,' Louisa said, ‘that of the two men, I find Mr Darcy’s countenance far more agreeable. The Colonel is rather ugly, if you think about it, is he not?’

‘Well, I would not say ugly,’ Caroline amended. ‘His features are perhaps not as fine as Mr Darcy’s -’

‘No, not at all,’ Louisa said. ‘And that scar -’

‘He has a very charming smile though,’ Caroline said. ‘And to tell you the truth, I hardly notice the scar anymore. It is perhaps because I have become so used to him, but I think there is a certain something in his face when it is animated, or rather the expression of it – and he has very shapely hands, you must admit that.’

‘Has he?’ Louisa said. ‘I must say I did not pay much attention to them.’
'Please, help yourself to some cupcakes,' Matthew said. ‘I picked them up from Mrs Miggins’ just this morning.’

Louisa was sorely tempted.

‘Should we not wait for Algie?’ she said.

‘Oh, I do not think we need to,’ Matthew said. ‘After all, there are enough for all of us if you can curb your greed, and it is his own fault if he is too late.’

‘Well, then,’ Louisa said and picked out a cupcake from the plate on the table.

Matthew poured himself a cup of coffee.

‘Oh, dear me,’ he said. ‘I forgot the cream. I will be back in a moment.’

Before Louisa could say anything, he had left the room and she had time to take in her surroundings. They were in one of the drawing-rooms about whose existence she had speculated when she had first visited this house. This time, however, she had entered it through the front door. To her astonishment, it had not been a butler who had opened it for her, but Matthew himself, greeting her cordially and leading her into the small but comfortable parlour, where coffee for three had already been prepared. The room was nothing compared to the parlours Louisa had visited in other houses. She could tell that the furniture’s object was not show but actual use and things like a forgotten newspaper on a small table and mis-matching cushions on the sofa told her that it was indeed used frequently, although she wondered by whom.

Moments later, Matthew returned with a small jug.

‘I knew there was something missing,’ he said as he added cream to his coffee.

‘Are there no servants in this house?’ Louisa asked, frowning. ‘Whose house is it anyway?’

‘Mine,’ Matthew said proudly, ‘that is, ours. Algie’s and mine, but the official documents are in my name only for obvious reasons.’

‘You live here together?’ Louisa asked.

‘When we have the time, yes,’ Matthew said. ‘Algie has rooms somewhere, of course, but we try to live here when we can. And that is why we have no servants living in the house.’

‘But who -‘ Louisa began then did not know how to ask the question.

‘I cook,’ Matthew said. ‘Or sometimes Algie, but he is rather dreadful at it. Most of the time though, we simply have things delivered here or we eat somewhere else.’

‘And -‘

‘We have someone coming in for cleaning and laundry and the like,’ Matthew explained. ‘As you could see, I am rather good at opening doors and I also do an admirable footman’s job when standing
around and looking unfazed is required.’

Louisa still was not quite convinced that this would work.

‘I assure you, Louisa, it is quite possible to live without servants,’ Matthew said. ‘Of course, there are disadvantages but it does have its benefits.’

‘And – this neighbourhood?’ Louisa asked.

‘Do you not think that two single men living together in Grosvenor Square with no servants would cause attraction?’ Matthew asked. ‘Here, nobody could be less interested. To all appearances I live here alone with a friend occasionally visiting, and since I am widely known as an eccentric amongst my family, they could not care less.’

Louisa could not find much more to say. Matthew checked his pocket watch.

‘Algie should be here soon,’ he said. ‘He knows we are having cupcakes, so I think he will try to be on time.’

As Caroline had known she would, Lady Grace, the Colonel’s elderly aunt, had fallen asleep as soon as she had sat down in the armchair. It was obvious why the Colonel thought his aunt to be an ideal chaperone, Caroline reflected as she leaned on the mantelpiece and watched the Colonel fumble with his pocket watch.

‘You are definitely to go to Hertfordshire?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Definitely,’ Caroline said. ‘Charles took possession of it just before Michaelmas and sent some servants there almost instantly. He went there again just yesterday and he intends to ready everything for us to follow but he cannot give us a precise date yet. Your cousin was in a very bad mood when I told him that, but I said it was your express wish that we go along with Charles’ plans. Then Louisa came near us and I had to pretend to laugh at something funny he had said, so he could not vent his anger.’

‘Your sister is still in favour of the match then?’

‘Very much so,’ Caroline sighed. ‘Hardly a day passes without her enumerating his many qualities. It is always Mr Darcy this and Mr Darcy that and when I so much as suggest that other mothers may have sons too she always reminds me that Mr Darcy is far superior and better-looking.’

‘That sounds as if you might make a match out of it after all, with so many qualities recommending the gentleman,’ the Colonel said and his smile did not quite reach his eyes.

‘Dear me, no,’ Caroline said. ‘Mr Darcy and I are quite decided about that. We should never suit. Goodness, no offense to you or your cousin, but he can be such a bore.’

‘He is keeping up with your pursuit very admirably though,’ the Colonel said.

‘Well, it is easy for him,’ Caroline said. ‘He does not have to humiliate himself in front of everyone. You said this would only be for a couple of weeks and now both Mr Hurst and Mr Darcy have been back from wherever they have been for nearly a fortnight and I am still throwing myself at him. Have you still not made any progress?’

‘None,’ the Colonel said.
‘I do not understand it,’ Caroline said. ‘With so many men at your disposal, can you not simply dig until you find something?’

‘What men?’ the Colonel asked. ‘There is only Darcy, me, and you.’

‘But -’ Caroline was taken aback, ‘but I thought you said you worked for – for some agency and that this was all part of that and -’

‘I am sorry if I misled you,’ the Colonel said, ‘it was unintentional. It is true, I work for – some agency, but this is not part of my work. This is a private endeavour.’

‘Are you telling me,’ Caroline cried, ‘that I have been making myself the ridicule of town for nothing more than some sport of yours and Darcy’s?’

‘Shh, Caroline,’ the Colonel said. ‘You will wake my aunt.’

He pointed at the snoring lady in the armchair, then leaned closer towards Caroline and took her hand.

‘It is true,’ he said, ‘we are in on this on our own but that does not mean it is not important.’

‘How so? If it was important, would you not let the officials know?’

‘We have no solid proof,’ the Colonel said, ‘and we fear the officials may have been infiltrated.’

‘Can I ask you something?’ Louisa asked.

‘Ask away, my dear;’ Matthew said. ‘I do not think I could keep any secrets from you now.’

‘Did you hate me much?’ Louisa asked. ‘When you first heard that Algie would marry me.’

‘Hate you?’ Matthew said and laughed. ‘If anything I pitied you. I know how annoying he can get when you live with him and you do not have the advantage that you love him.’

‘You knew then that it was only for – for show, this marriage?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Matthew said. ‘It was the only way he saw to be close enough to Darcy. He told me that right from the beginning.’

‘Oh!’ Louisa said. ‘He never mentioned that you were part of – of the whole thing.’

‘I am not,’ Matthew said. ‘Not officially, at least. I am not working for them or anything.’

‘But you know?’

‘I do.’

‘He told you?’

‘He did,’ Matthew confirmed. ‘After Ireland, we agreed that it would be better if he told me when something bothered him instead of keeping all to him. He is not exactly a chatterbox – unlike me or you, my dear – but he talks these days and I am glad about that.’

‘Do you know that he blackmailed me?’

‘Yes,’ Matthew said, frowning. ‘I cannot say I was entirely happy about that. Of course, for
Christian, it was alright to blackmail for the sake of the plan but – well. I tried to argue with him but he was doggedly determined to pursue his plan.’

He sighed.

‘Once he has something set in his head, it is hard to dissuade him from completing it,’ he said, then added reflectively, ‘I think the only time when he did not have a plan at the ready and the determination to see it through was when he met me. That really threw him for a loop.’

‘Did he tell you how he blackmailed me?’ Louisa asked.

‘No, of course not,’ Matthew said. ‘That would hardly have been fair, now would it? He only said that I should not worry he was marrying a murderess, but that there were certain episodes in your past he was sure you would rather forget. He never told me though and I never asked.’

‘I will tell you,’ Louisa said.

‘Honestly, you do not need to -’

‘But I want to,’ Louisa said. ‘I think you ought to know.’

The Colonel pulled Caroline further away from his snoring aunt and dragged her into a corner of the room.

‘This is between you and me,’ he said, ‘and must not leave this room.’

Caroline nodded her agreement.

‘Someone has been using Darcy’s name,’ he whispered into her ear, ‘in dealings with the French. This person is gathering information under Darcy’s name since about Easter this year, conveys said information to the French, also under Darcy’s name, and in return, receives money and smuggled goods from France. The dates when we know transactions to have taken place correlate to what we know of Hurst’s movements, and there is more evidence pointing towards him.’

Caroline gasped.

‘Shh!’ the Colonel said.

‘But – but – but,’ Caroline stammered.

The Colonel placed a hand over her mouth.

‘Not a single word,’ he said. ‘You never know who might be listening.’

With a loud yelp, Lady Grace awoke.

‘What is going on?’ she shouted upon seeing her nephew standing in the corner with Caroline. ‘Has he behaved improperly again? Come here, Miss Bingley. Shame on you!’

She wildly gesticulated with her cane in the Colonel’s direction whilst trying to pat Caroline’s hand comfortingly.

‘No, no,’ Caroline said loudly, ‘your nephew has done nothing, Lady Grace.’

‘Nothing?’ Lady Grace shouted. ‘He was standing there in a corner fondling your ear!’
‘He was helping me with my hairpins,’ Caroline said. ‘One of them had become loose and when I wanted to replace it, I somehow wrapped some hair around my ear.’

‘Hairpins,’ Lady Grace snorted. ‘You should wear a wig, dear, that would be more practical.’

Again, she wildly gesticulated with her cane and barked at her nephew, ‘Why do you not get your aunt something to drink?’

‘Because this is not actually my house, aunt,’ the Colonel said. ‘It would be impolite.’

‘Let me find a maid,’ Caroline said hastily. ‘I think I could do with some tea.’

‘Tea?’ Lady Grace muttered. ‘When I said drink, I rather thought -’

‘That is all?’ Matthew said when Louisa had finished her tale. ‘I thought it must have been something much worse – dearest Louisa, there is nothing you should blame yourself for.’

‘It is bad enough!’ Louisa said. ‘And it is so embarrassing – I cannot believe how stupid I was, to be taken in like that – so foolish!’

‘You were fifteen, Louisa,’ Matthew pointed out gently. ‘You were without your sister or your guardians for the first time, you felt alone – it was only natural -’

‘I thought I loved him,’ Louisa said. ‘I thought we were meant to be together – I thought I was justified in doing what I did because I loved him and he loved me -’

‘Of course you did,’ Matthew said. ‘I repeat, you were but fifteen.’

‘And he did not love me,’ Louisa said. ‘I know that now – he never loved me.’

‘No,’ Matthew said and handed her his handkerchief.

‘Still, I was a fool,’ Louisa said. ‘And it was stupid of me not to realise that earlier – if I had understood earlier – if I had not written those letters where I practically admitted -’

‘Then Christian would not have blackmailed you, and we would never have met,’ Matthew concluded. ‘Now, that would have been a shame, would it not?’

Louisa laughed.

‘I can laugh about it now,’ she said, ‘but you cannot imagine how mortified I was when I was a fifteen-year-old girl who had just found out what she had unwittingly done. I was so ashamed of what I had done and what he had been to me I never told anyone, not even Caroline, and I do not ever want her to find out – and there are the letters, of course -’

‘Yes, the letters,’ Matthew said, ‘they do not throw the best light on the affair. If they ever surfaced -’

‘I cannot have them surface!’ Louisa said.

‘Do not worry,’ Matthew said. ‘As long as I have a say in that matter, they will not.’

‘Thank you,’ Louisa said. ‘You are a real friend -’

‘Keeping your secrets as you are keeping mine,’ Matthew said. ‘All in a day’s work.’
‘Yes, but -’ Louisa began.

She was interrupted, however, by the sound of the door opening and steps in the hallway. Moments later, her husband entered the room. He lightly pressed Matthew’s shoulder before sitting down on the sofa next to him.

‘I must apologise for being late,’ he said and sighed. ‘It has been a long day. What did I miss?’

‘We were just talking about -’ Matthew began, but Louisa interrupted him.

‘- about how it was your own fault if there were no cupcakes left for you,’ she finished.

Matthew raised an eyebrow and Louisa shook her head a fraction. Mr Hurst was oblivious to the exchange.

‘One of these days,’ he said as he helped himself to tea, ‘I am going to strangle Sir Horace and I do not care if they send me to New South Wales for it.’

‘Do what you must, dearest Algie,’ Matthew said. ‘Shall I begin packing?’

Louisa frowned. ‘Sir Horace?’

‘My, ah, superior,’ Mr Hurst explained. ‘Completely devoid of anything approaching intellectual capacity, but excellently connected.’

He snorted.

‘And it is exactly this love of his for connections that has put us into this situation in the first place,’ he said. ‘I was all for questioning Darcy outright but no, Darcy is too well-connected – the old goblin insisted we must have proof beyond a doubt before we confront him – he cannot risk his standing with Darcy’s aunt -’

‘Darcy’s aunt?’ Louisa said and frowned. ‘The Countess? What does she have to do with it?’

‘No, the other aunt,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Lady Catherine. One of the largest land-owners in Kent, and quite coincidentally a neighbour of Sir Horace.’

‘Ah,’ said Louisa.

‘And a widow,’ Mr Hurst added. ‘The only heir is her sickly daughter.’

‘Yes, I believe Mr Darcy mentioned that,’ Louisa said.

‘Sir Horace has aspirations towards the old battleaxe?’ Matthew asked. ‘That is the first time you mentioned this.’

‘Well, it only came to me today,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Whilst I was listening to yet another of the great man’s diatribes about how I must trapeze careful around Darcy, the pieces of the jigsaw fell together. That was why Sir Horace was so adamant that I try to get close to Darcy through some woman who was to pursue him – Lady Catherine intends for her daughter to marry Darcy but if he is already engaged elsewhere – oh, he may be dim-witted but even Sir Horace has his moments of cleverness.’

He groaned and emptied his teacup.

‘And after reminding me that I have to be careful, he begins again to complain that we do not have any results yet,’ he said. ‘And then the whole litany began anew.’
‘The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done*.’ Matthew said and squeezed Mr Hurst’s hand.

‘Do we have something stronger than this?’ Mr Hurst asked. ‘The tea did not quite do the trick.’

‘There is no more scotch but there might be some brandy upstairs,’ Matthew said. ‘Unless you emptied the bottle.’

‘No, I believe I left some,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘No, stay seated. I will get it.’

He got up and left the room, closing the room behind himself. After a moment, Matthew turned to Louisa.

‘Why do you not want him to know that you are still upset about the blackmail?’ he asked.

‘Oh, it is all so stupid,’ Louisa said. ‘I had rather not talk about it with him. I always feel the need to explain myself -’

‘Yes, but still,’ Matthew said. ‘The least he could do would be to apologise. It was a rather nasty thing to do to you, even if he had a reason.’

‘Maybe, yes,’ Louisa said. ‘Oh, I do not know.’

Before she could fully explain herself, Mr Hurst had returned, the bottle of brandy in his hand.

‘Anybody else want some?’ he asked.

‘No, thank you,’ Louisa said. ‘I think I will go home now.’

‘Give me a minute or two, and I will come with you,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I just need to sit down for a moment -’

‘No, you stay here,’ Louisa said. ‘Matthew can hail a cab, can you not?’

‘Of course,’ Matthew said. ‘If you really want to go -’

‘Oh, yes,’ Louisa said. ‘I promised Charles and Caroline I would play cards with them tonight.’

‘I will be right back,’ Matthew said and left the room.

‘I really can come with you,’ Mr Hurst began, but Louisa cut him short.

‘Please, stay, unless you want to play cards with us,’ she said. ‘I assure you I will be fine. Only do not come too late; I will tell them you are dining in your club.’

‘Thanks, Lou,’ Mr Hurst said and gave her a genuine smile. ‘I do need an evening away from it all.’

‘Well, then,’ Louisa said. ‘I shall see if Matthew has already found me a cab.’

The Colonel helped his aunt into the carriage, then hastily came back inside on the pretense of having forgot his gloves.

‘I apologise,’ he said, ‘fully, unreservedly and from the bottom of my heart, for any and all things my aunt may have said or insinuated. I regret I was ever born to be related to her.’

‘You are ridiculous,’ Caroline said softly, taking his hand. ‘Shall I see you again soon?’
‘I shall call on you as soon as I have found a more suitable chaperone,’ the Colonel said, lifted his hat and was gone.

Chapter End Notes

* Ecclesiastes 1:9.
If Lady Grace had no qualms about sleeping in somebody else’s drawing-room, it was no wonder that she should choose to do so in her own even when she had guests. It might not have been normal behaviour in a hostess, but it was entirely normal behaviour in Lady Grace. At least the footman seemed to think so when he announced Lady Grace’s nephew in a low tone. Caroline was equally quiet when she greeted the Colonel.

‘Please be careful,’ she whispered and pointed at the snoring figure in the armchair on the other side of the room. ‘Your aunt is asleep.’

‘So it would appear,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

‘Why do we not sit down?’ Caroline suggested.

The Colonel did as she had asked, then mustered her and smiled. ‘You were behind all this!’

‘Behind all what?’ Caroline asked innocently.

‘I received an urgent summons to take tea with Lady Grace,’ the Colonel said. ‘I can only guess whose idea that was.’

‘You said you did not want to meet me without a chaperone,’ Caroline said. ‘And I want some more information from you.’

‘Information? What sort of information?’

‘Well, Colonel, it just so happened that you did not finish telling me what exactly you had learnt about the -’ She lowered her voice even further and breathed the next word. ‘Spy.’

‘As I recall it,’ the Colonel said. ‘That was rather on purpose.’

‘You do not want to tell me any more then?’

‘My dear Miss Bingley, I have told you far too much already.’

Caroline pouted.

‘It is hardly fair, though,’ she pointed out and her voice became steadily louder. ‘It is my sister after all who is involved in all this. It was I who insisted that we investigate Hurst. It is I who has to pretend all the time -’

‘For heaven’s sake, keep your voice down!’ the Colonel hissed and jerked his head in the direction of his aunt.

‘Do you not think you owe me at least the truth?’ Caroline said. ‘After all, I am doing just as much of the dirty work as you – more perhaps, since I do the actual spying.’

The Colonel said nothing. He did not look at Caroline but kept his gaze on his folded hands in his lap.
'Have you any idea what I am going through?' Caroline said urgently. ‘Do you know that people are making fun of me for what they think are hopeless efforts on Darcy? Have you any idea how humiliating it is to know everybody is laughing about me behind my back? I know that my behaviour around him is ridiculous – it might be marginally less uncomfortable if he actually had the acting skills to play along, but as it is, I am making a complete fool of myself in front of almost all my friends.’

The Colonel still said nothing, but pressed his fingers firmly together.

‘I would not mind doing that,’ Caroline said, ‘at least not overly much, if at least I knew that what I did had an actual cause, that I was not doing all of that for nothing – I thought that this was serious business, but from the way you are behaving right now, one could think that you were simply trying to give me an occupation. I thank you, Colonel, but I can keep myself busy on my own.’

Still, the Colonel said nothing. He was staring into his lap and pressing his lips firmly together.

‘Can you not, at least, admit that I have a point?’

‘Of course you have a point,’ the Colonel said. ‘I did not deny that. Believe me, my refusal to tell you more is not an attempt to belittle you or your efforts.’

‘What is it then?’

‘Can you not see I am trying to protect you?’ the Colonel cried, then checked himself and continued in a lower tone. ‘Too much knowledge about this could be dangerous for you – as long as you do not know anything, you are simply a lady trying to find out more about who her brother is. You are a spy only if you know this is a business of espionage.’

Angry tears shot into Caroline’s eyes and she furiously wiped them away.

‘Right now, Colonel,’ she said, ‘you are belittling me. I had thought you, of all people –’

‘Miss Bingley, please,’ the Colonel said. ‘Believe me, I –’

‘I wish you a good day, Colonel,’ Caroline said and gathered her shawl and her reticule. ‘Let me know when you change your mind.’

‘Are you leaving?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Yes,’ Caroline said. ‘Please make my apologies to your aunt, will you?’

‘Try to understand me, please – Caroline –’

‘You know where to find me,’ Caroline said to the door, not wanting to turn around and look at him again. ‘Good day, Colonel.’

She hastily left the room before she could change her mind.

Louisa finished her last cupcake, set her plate down and leaned back in the comfortable, stuffed armchair.

‘Oh, I will miss those when I am in Hertfordshire,’ she said. ‘If ever we do get there, that is.’

‘Why, was there a change in plans?’ Matthew asked. ‘Algie did not mention anything, but then, I only saw him very briefly yesterday.’
'Not that I know of,' Louisa said, ‘but Charles is so abysmal at organising things – he makes decisions at the spur of a moment but does not realise we cannot all drop everything and follow him at once. Caroline wrote him a list of things he must do before we can leave, and I do hope he pays attention to it.’

She sighed.

‘What is the matter?’ Matthew asked.

‘It is Caroline,’ Louisa said. ‘She is angry although I have no idea why or with whom. It was impossible speaking to her yesterday, she snapped at everyone who dared come near her. I can only hope she has not found out about – you know –’

‘Algie’s schemes,’ Matthew finished for her.

‘Yes, them,’ Louisa said. ‘Speaking of dear Algernon, he is not in the best of moods either, is he?’

‘I should not think so,’ Matthew said. ‘Apparently, Sir Horace decided to leave for Kent two days ago and left him with everything.’

‘Going to court a certain lady, is he?’ Louisa asked and snickered. ‘Poor old Algie.’

Caroline did her very best to look contemptuous as she greeted the Colonel, who had turned up, hat in hands and an apologetic expression in his face, when she had just finished breakfast.

‘You are calling very early, Colonel,’ Caroline said coolly.

‘I hoped to catch you before your other admirers arrived,’ the Colonel said.

‘Did you?’ Caroline said. ‘And what, pray, do you want?’

‘To apologise, first and foremost,’ the Colonel said and sighed. ‘Listen, I am sorry. I realise I had no right to patronise you.’

‘Hm,’ Caroline said, not ready yet to forgive.

‘And then, I want to ask you to come driving with me,’ the Colonel said. ‘A nice, long drive around the park to clear up any questions you might have.’

‘What happened to never meeting without a chaperone?’ Caroline asked. ‘Did you not say that we had to adhere to that rule all the time?’

‘I think we can forgo it this once,’ the Colonel said. ‘I think we shall be safe in an open carriage, do you not think so? I promise I shall try to behave.’

‘Oh, very well, then,’ Caroline said after some deliberation. ‘Wait for me while I change.’

‘As you wish,’ the Colonel said and took a seat.

Caroline returned not long afterwards, putting on her gloves as she entered the room.

‘Shall we, then?’ she asked.

‘Ready when you are,’ the Colonel said. ‘By the bye, where is your sister?’
'She was out even earlier than you,' Caroline said. ‘She and Mr Hurst are visiting an exhibition together with Mr Aldridge, or so she said.’

The Colonel nodded, but did not speak again until he had handed Caroline into the carriage and they were off.

‘What, then, Miss Bingley,’ he finally asked, ‘was it that you wanted to know?’

‘Oh!’ Caroline said, taken aback that he would come straight to the point. ‘Well -’

‘You wanted to know, now ask,’ the Colonel said not unkindly.

‘There is so much -’ Caroline said. ‘I do not think I have understood it all. I will need you to recapitulate it for me.’

‘Certainly.’

Louisa tried her hardest to appear interested in the still life in front of her, but could not help concentrating more on her husband’s voice.

‘ - and then, if you will believe it, after having casually dropped a whole stack of reports onto my desk,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘the man had the gall to ask me what I thought of his new beaver hat.’

‘And what did you say?’ Matthew asked.

‘Complimented him on his taste, of course,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘What else was there to do?’

He cleared his throat.

‘No need to tell him he looks like an over-excited goat in it,’ he added. ‘And then, with a further warning not to let Darcy out of my sight, and a meaningful look at the reports, he was gone to Kent.’

Matthew made some rather rude allusions to Sir Horace’s paternity which Louisa tried her best not to hear.

‘So, do I get this right – you and your cousin were first suspicious of Mr Hurst when my brother asked you what you could find out about him, and you found nothing but the -’

‘- nothing but the naked facts, yes,’ the Colonel said.

‘But you did not then suspect that he was a spy?’ Caroline asked.

‘No, we thought he might be after your sister’s, or someone else’s, money,’ the Colonel said.

‘So when were your suspicions first raised to his being a spy?’ Caroline asked.

‘Well,’ the Colonel began. ‘You may remember that I asked you to keep an eye on him and to thwart the schemes he and Louisa might have as well as you could; schemes which both you and I at that time suspected to involve Darcy.’

Caroline nodded her agreement.

‘While you did that, we of course also tried to find out more,’ the Colonel said. ‘The only real clue we had been able to find was the hint you had given me regarding Darcy, so that was where I began
to investigate.’

Caroline frowned.

‘One thing I do not understand, Colonel,’ she said.

‘Yes?’

‘I know it would have been too much perhaps in the beginning,’ she said, ‘but once you realised that there was definitely something wrong with him, what kept you from going wherever it is his house is and making enquiries there?’

‘Nothing,’ the Colonel said, ‘except from the fact that I have work to do here, which I could not just leave alone, and Darcy – well, Darcy had some family problems this summer and could not go either.’

‘Yes, but could you not -’

‘I could have sent one of my inferiors, on some pretext, of course,’ the Colonel admitted. ‘But I chose not to do so for reasons I will come to in a moment.’

Caroline tried to look as if she understood him.

‘Miss Bingley,’ the Colonel said and took her hand. ‘Here, perhaps, I have a confession to make.’

He turned towards her and gave her a meaningful look.

‘Oh, Algie,’ Louisa drawled, ‘just so you know, I absolutely had to order new frocks. You will receive the bill one of these days, I suppose.’

‘Whatever you wish, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Have my new boots been sent yet?’

‘How should I know?’ Louisa asked.

‘Could not go shooting with last year’s boots,’ Mr Hurst continued seemingly unperturbed. ‘Let me know when they arrive, will you?’

‘She has left the room,’ Louisa said. ‘Dreadfully nosy woman, Mrs Whittington.’

‘And now it will be up to her to decide whether I am spending your money, or you mine,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Do either of you care to see any more paintings?’

‘Not particularly,’ Louisa said. ‘Matthew?’

‘I believe we have seen everything of worth,’ Matthew said.

‘I shall hail a cab then,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Matthew, will you wait with Louisa? I believe there were some benches in the next room.’

Louisa allowed herself to be led to the benches and helped into a seat by Matthew.

‘I wanted to thank you again,’ Matthew said earnestly.

‘What for?’ Louisa asked.

‘For allowing us to be ourselves,’ Matthew said. ‘You cannot know how much it means.’
Louisa did not know what to say.

‘I am serious,’ Matthew said. ‘There are so many other ways in which you could have behaved – you could have had us arrested, or at least – I do not know, tried to make us not see each other –’

‘Oh, but I wouldn’t!’ Louisa exclaimed.

‘I know,’ Matthew said. ‘Forgive me, I am only curious as to why you would not.’

‘I have no idea,’ Louisa said.

She looked around herself but they were the only ones in the room; no one could overhear them.

‘In the beginning,’ she continued, ‘I suppose I merely was too surprised to do anything.’

‘Completely understandable,’ Matthew said. ‘I think we all were.’

‘It is not the thing one expects when one follows one’s husband, is it?’ Louisa said. ‘I mean, I was sure there was another woman –’

‘Would you have minded that?’ Matthew asked.

‘Not in the least,’ Louisa said. ‘I never had any illusions about our marriage after all. I always knew it was purely a business agreement.’

‘You did not wish Christian would fall in love with you one day?’ Matthew asked. ‘The way these marriages usually play out in novels?’

‘Goodness, no,’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘The man I married was truly despicable! I was only hoping I would be rid of him as soon as I could be. When I first met him ten years ago, I did not know him very well, you see, and the person he was when we married was horrible. He was completely unfeeling, vicious and mean.’

‘He tends to present himself like that, yes,’ Matthew conceded.

‘And then when I first saw him with you,’ Louisa continued, ‘I understood that what I had seen so far was not his true self –’

‘Undoubtedly,’ Matthew said.

‘This is going to sound trite,’ Louisa said, ‘but when I saw that he truly loved you, I understood that he was a better man than I had thought.’

‘Ah, but does that really make him a better man?’ Matthew said. ‘For sinners also love those that love them*, do they not?’

Louisa did not quite know how to answer this.

‘Could not get a cab for ages,’ Algernon drawled behind her. ‘Do not know what is the matter with some people here. You will not believe who I saw just now.’

‘Must you always sneak up on me?’ Louisa asked. ‘Honestly, Algernon!’

‘Shall we, then, Louisa?’ Matthew said and offered her his arm.
‘Do you know that your sister is driving out with Colonel Fitzwilliam?’ Mr Hurst said when they were climbing into the cab he had called.

‘I had no idea,’ Louisa said. ‘Just last night when I hinted about him, she told me she did not care if she never saw him again.’

‘She seems to have changed her mind then,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I always wondered if there was something between the two of them, but as long as she still thinks favourably of Mr Darcy -’

‘That she does,’ Louisa said. ‘She said so only last night when we spoke.’

‘Well then,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Sir Horace will not be happy to hear about the drive with the Colonel, but as long as Mr Darcy is still in her good graces – of course there is no saying when Sir Horace will actually see my report, seeing as he is still wooing money in Kent.’

He sighed.

‘Meanwhile, he has me write lists of people with whom Darcy might be close,’ he said. ‘Any friends Darcy has had in the past twenty years. How am I supposed to find that out without asking Darcy? I have half a dozen names of people with whom he was in contact at university but I have no idea how Sir Horace expects me to know who of those might be working together with Darcy.’

‘Darcy is working together with an old friend?’ Louisa asked. ‘You never said so.’

‘Sir Horace’s latest hare-brained scheme,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘There is of course no proof and I do not believe it for one second, but it makes Sir Horace happy to think I am investigating it.’

Matthew laughed. ‘And so you are going through countless stories of Darcy and his friends indulging in liquor and loose women, poor Algie.’

‘If only,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘The most scandalous thing so far is a childhood friend with a history of gaming at high stakes, but I do not even know if he has been in contact with Darcy these past five years.’

________________________________________

‘A confession, Colonel?’ Caroline asked, her eyes wide open.

‘I lied to you,’ the Colonel said.

‘You lied to me?’ Caroline repeated. ‘Colonel, I -’

‘Well, perhaps I did not lie as such,’ the Colonel amended, ‘but I allowed you to continue under a misapprehension.’

He pressed her hand and looked squarely at her.

‘As for why I did that,’ he said. ‘I believe, Miss Bingley -’

‘Colonel, the horses!’ Caroline shrieked. ‘Do something!’

She dug her fingernails into his palm as the horses broke into an uncontrolled gallop and threatened to run straight into the Serpentine.

‘Right,’ the Colonel said, let go of her hands and pulled the reins. ‘No harm done yet.’

The horses, still breathing heavily, slowed down to their usual trot again and Caroline exhaled
loudly.

‘Well, that only illustrates my point,’ the Colonel said with a wry smile. ‘I am not a man of action, Miss Bingley. That is what I meant to tell you.’

‘But you said you were working for a secret organisation -’ Caroline said.

‘I am,’ the Colonel said. ‘I did not lie to you there. However -’ He cleared his throat. ‘Most of the time, I am confined to a desk. I do not catch spies. I translate incoming letters, I proof reports, I summarise them for my superiors, I evaluate them, I read foreign newspapers -’

He nestled in the pocket of his waist-coat with one hand while holding on to the reins with his other.

‘I usually wear spectacles for reading,’ he said and placed the wire frame on his nose. ‘I am not a hero, Caroline.’

Chapter End Notes

Caroline stared at the Colonel and knew not what precisely to say. The round, gold-rimmed spectacles were not exactly ugly, but they did change the aspect of the Colonel’s face. She could not precisely say how, but he looked different to her. Astonishingly, he also seemed to be more at ease now that he had made his confession to her.

‘That is your terrible secret?’ Caroline asked incredulously. ‘That you work from behind a desk and wear spectacles?’

‘I am afraid so,’ the Colonel said. ‘Not very dashing, is it?’

‘At least you are not very likely to be shot,’ Caroline said. ‘And you still get to wear the uniform?’

‘I do have the uniform, yes,’ the Colonel conceded.

‘So what do you do all day?’ Caroline asked.

‘Well, I read, mostly,’ the Colonel said. ‘Whenever something of interest happens, someone writes about it and it crosses my desk.’

‘And this is how you first became aware of a spy being after Darcy?’

‘Yes, precisely,’ the Colonel said. ‘As I said, when I first noticed something odd, I began to investigate. And it turned out that Darcy’s name turned up more often than I would have liked in — well, he was mentioned by certain circles more often than he should have been.’

Caroline looked confused. ‘Do you mean the Fr–’

‘I should not have mentioned that,’ the Colonel said. ‘Let us just say, circles that are not necessarily friendly. Anyway, Darcy’s name was mentioned far too often for it to be a coincidence. There were only two possible conclusions.’

Caroline waited with bated breath for the answer.

‘One was,’ the Colonel said, ‘that my cousin had seen fit to betray his country and his king, using his influence to obtain information that was not meant for him.’

‘Impossible!’ Caroline exclaimed.

‘The other,’ the Colonel calmly continued, ‘was, that someone had used his name to do this.’

‘Of course -’

‘Of course my cousin is innocent,’ the Colonel said. ‘I say this not only because I wish it to be the case, but because I know how — and where — he spent most of his summer, and I have the proof that at least at one of those times when information was traded, he cannot have been in the place that was used.’

‘I see,’ Caroline said. ‘I would never have thought it possible of Mr Darcy in any case.’
‘Me neither,’ the Colonel said, ‘but I cannot allow personal feelings to overrule facts, and the facts did point in my cousin’s direction.’

He paused for a moment.

‘So much so, in fact,’ he said, ‘that I had to conclude that whoever was the real culprit might be deliberately setting my cousin up, in addition to the damage he was bringing to this country. Furthermore, the culprit was using information about Darcy that is not universally accessible. It was not something that only his closest confidantes would know, but more than a casual acquaintance would be necessary.’

‘And all this pointed to Mr Hurst,’ Caroline said.

‘Not at first,’ the Colonel said. ‘When I first became suspicious, I did not know very much of him and it seemed unlikely that he would know much about Darcy. However, the dates of transactions which we can confirm coincide with Mr Hurst’s strange absences – the first transaction of which we know took place in May, about the time Mr Hurst met – or claims to have met – your sister – in short, we knew that someone had been plotting against Darcy since about May, and that was precisely when Mr Hurst stepped into your lives. It was too great a coincidence. I thought it at least very likely that he had something to do with it and further investigations only confirmed my suspicions. I had not yet determined what grudge he could have against Darcy – I suppose that we will only find that out once we learn his true identity – but everything else fitted all I knew about the culprit only too well.’

‘That is all perfectly understandable,’ Caroline said. ‘But why – once you had assembled all this information, why did you not do something about it? Inform someone, make Mr Hurst confess it all.’

‘Because,’ the Colonel said, ‘I could not tell who else might be involved. You see, the culprit did not much to hide his traces – Darcy’s name was clearly written all over the place. I could not help but wonder if perhaps the person who did that knew where to make Darcy’s name appear, knew where to place it because he is reading the same papers as I am – if, perhaps, someone within my own organisation is involved.’

Caroline swallowed.

‘So you see why this must not go beyond Darcy, yourself and me,’ the Colonel said. ‘We do not know who else might be involved. Also, you see why we must act. I will freely admit that I may be the wrong person for this. After all, I do not have a lot of experiencing with practical espionage. However, there simply is no one whom we can trust, no one I could ask for help. And still, if my worst fears are proven, the culprit is someone who has access to a great deal of very sensitive information. By pretending to be acting on Darcy’s wishes or assuming Darcy’s name – I have no concrete knowledge about how he uses Darcy – he can access a great deal more; in fact, so much that the kingdom could be endangered.’

‘You do suspect a certain person then?’ Caroline asked eagerly.

‘I knew you would pick that up the second I said it,’ the Colonel sighed. ‘Yes, I am afraid that is the case. My superior – well, let us say he is a man of rather mean understanding who got the post he now holds through good connections rather than true talent and who would not be above improving his own situation if the chance offered itself.’

‘Oh,’ Caroline said.
‘You must not breathe a word of this to anyone,’ the Colonel said. ‘Not even Darcy knows whom I suspect.’

‘Of course,’ Caroline said.

‘Do I have your promise?’ the Colonel said.

‘I promise,’ Caroline said, ‘on my mother’s grave. I will swear on the Bible if you insist.’

‘No,’ the Colonel said and took her hand. ‘I trust you.’

‘Thank you,’ Caroline muttered.

Louisa climbed up the familiar steps to the front door and knocked. Matthew opened the door with his usual smile.

‘Algie will be here in a minute,’ Louisa said. ‘He just remembered he had to pick up something for a gun or some such.’

She followed Matthew inside and into the drawing-room, where she carefully removed her hat, jacket and gloves and placed them on a sideboard.

‘I hope you do not mind,’ she said, indicating her items, ‘but I felt rather flushed right now.’

‘Treat it as if it were your own home,’ Matthew said. ‘Do sit down.’

He helped Louisa to tea and scones from a tray and then poured some for himself.

‘When are you to leave?’ he asked.

‘Some time this week, I suppose,’ Louisa said. ‘I am sure Charles will inform us soon when he intends to leave.’

‘How is dear old Algie?’ Matthew asked.

‘A nuisance, as usual,’ Louisa said. ‘He has been saying that he hopes to finish everything in Hertfordshire and return to town a free man.’

‘Did he put it like that?’ Matthew asked.

‘Not that bluntly, for my sake, I suppose,’ Louisa said. ‘But he has repeatedly said that he will not miss Mr Hurst one bit.’

‘You are prepared then to play the mourning widow,’ Matthew said.

‘As well as one can be,’ Louisa answered. ‘How does one prepare? But I have been packing some mourning clothes, just in case. I do hope my maid did not think it too odd. I told her one never knew what one might need.’

‘You are all packed then?’ Matthew asked.

‘As good as,’ Louisa said. ‘There are of course always those little things one forgets until the last minute, but I am sure my maid will think of everything.’

‘I hope you did not make the same mistake you made the last time you were travelling with Algie,’
Matthew said.

‘Which would be?’ Louisa asked.

‘Not to pack any books,’ Matthew said. ‘I am sure you do not want to end up reading nothing but treatises on political participation again.’

‘Heavens, no,’ Louisa said and laughed. ‘But I must admit I forgot to think about packing a book. I shall have to buy one later today.’

‘Take this,’ Matthew said and pulled a book from a low table. ‘I just finished it and it is absolutely horrid. Trust me, you will not be able to put it down once you begin.’

‘No politics?’ Louisa asked.

‘None whatsoever,’ Matthew said. ‘Just a novel. Frightfully exciting.’

‘In that case,’ Louisa said. ‘I will gladly take it with me. Thank you.’

They sat in silence for a moment. Louisa observed Matthew slowly sipping his tea, holding the cup and saucer with his broad hands. She noted that he wore a signet ring with a large black stone on his finger and wondered briefly if she had seen him seal something before. It astonished her that she had never thought much of his physical presence before when she now realised that he was easily as strong and broadly built as her husband.

‘I am going to miss you,’ Matthew said. ‘You will write, won’t you, at least occasionally?’

‘Of course I will,’ Louisa said. ‘But I do not suppose we shall stay in Hertfordshire for very long. We may see each other again very soon.’

‘Ah, but what if Algie decides to die in the mean-time?’ Matthew asked. ‘I do not think we will be able to meet again after that.’

Louisa was silenced by this; she had not thought about it before.

‘But -’ she began.

‘Oh, I do not think we will lose sight of each other forever,’ Matthew said. ‘In a couple of years, surely, when the world has all but forgot your first husband, and you are happily married and have a dozen charming children – I should wonder though if you remembered me at all then.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Louisa said.

‘Why not?’ Matthew asked. ‘I wish you all the happiness in the world, my dear friend.’

‘I do not think I shall marry again,’ Louisa said earnestly. ‘I shall not have to, so why should I?’

‘You say that now,’ Matthew answered. ‘But one day, it may just happen to you that you run into someone who makes you change all the plans you ever had. Just look at me – I always saw my future in a quaint country vicarage with a pleasantly non-descript wife by my side, and now -’

‘Will you miss Algie very much?’ Louisa asked.

‘Of course,’ Matthew said. ‘But I shall not be absolutely shattered, if that is what you fear.’

He grinned.
'We are no dull, sublunary lovers*,' he said. ‘I do not need him by my side all the time. I will probably go to see my mother while you are gone.’

He sat down his teacup and took Louisa’s hand in his.

‘My dearest Louisa,’ he said. ‘I promise that we shall see each other again, whether you are still Algernon’s long-suffering wife, the mother of a great flock, or a scandalous, fashionable widow.’

Caroline was shown into the family’s private drawing-room by the footman. Colonel Fitzwilliam greeted her with all the niceties which propriety dictated and asked her to take a seat.

‘I am afraid my sister has gone out,’ the Colonel said.

‘I know,’ Caroline said. ‘I waited until she had left the house before I called.’

‘What is the matter?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Everything is arranged,’ Caroline said.

The Colonel raised an eyebrow.

‘I am to leave,’ Caroline said. ‘I just learnt it. I have no idea when, or even if, I shall return.’

‘My dearest,’ the Colonel said, ‘are you not being a tad over-dramatic? We are not at war yet, are we?’

‘I mean,’ Caroline clarified, ‘we are leaving for Hertfordshire tomorrow. Charles just informed us that he has accepted invitations to some local assembly and that we absolutely have to travel tomorrow. Louisa is nearly running mad with all sorts of secret preparations and Charles is carrying his gun-cases to and fro – I simply had to get away and see you.’

The Colonel chuckled.

‘Poor Darcy,’ he said. ‘Does he know already?’

‘I hope so,’ Caroline said and frowned. ‘Charles said he would send him a note.’

‘If he has not, I will inform Darcy,’ the Colonel said. ‘I must see him tonight if he leaves tomorrow. But first, my dear, I will enjoy this precious stolen time with you.’

‘Precious stolen time,’ Caroline snorted. ‘I am here to receive instructions.’

‘That too, of course,’ the Colonel said.

For a moment, neither of them spoke a word. Caroline tried to keep her gloved hands folded in her lap, but her nerves prevailed. She could not prevent herself from fiddling with her gloves, finally pulling them off and putting them onto her thighs. Almost immediately, one of the gloves slid down the material of her dress and fell to the floor. The Colonel got up from his seat, knelt by her side and handed her the glove. Still on his knees, he looked up at her and asked, ‘What sort of instruction do you want?’

‘It would be nice, for a start,’ Caroline said, ‘if you told me what I am supposed to do.’

‘Obviously, you need to keep up your pursuit of Darcy,’ the Colonel said.
'Great, and make yet another set of people think I am after him,' Caroline said. 'Well, at least it is in the country. I do not care what they think of me.'

'Also,' the Colonel continued, 'if anything about Louisa’s or Hurst’s behaviour strikes you as odd -'

'You mean odder than usual?' Caroline interjected.

'Quite,' the Colonel said. 'In that case, inform Darcy at once and he will let me know. Do not contact me yourself unless it is an emergency.'

With his hands pressed against his thigh, he finally pulled himself up from his kneeling position and stood now directly before Caroline, towering over her, so close that she thought she could feel the heat radiating from him. Nervously, she began playing with the straps of her reticule.

'What if it is something I cannot discuss with Darcy, because it concerns him?' she asked.

'If you must,' the Colonel said, 'you can send a letter through my sister but you had better give her a good excuse for it – or a good story.'

Instead of returning to his chair, he seated himself on the sofa next to Caroline.

'Very well,' Caroline said. 'Anything else?'

The Colonel reached for the reticule she was still toying with and pulled it from her hands before she could twist the straps completely.

'Behave yourself, be a good girl, think of me every night and sleep with a gun under your pillow.'

Caroline’s eyes widened. 'Really?'

'No, not unless you know how to use it. I do not want to have to identify your corpse.'

'When shall I see you again?' Caroline asked.

'I cannot say,' the Colonel said and ran a hand through his hair. ‘Perhaps I can free myself for a week and come to Hertfordshire, but otherwise, probably not until you return to town for Christmas – you will return for Christmas, that is?'

'How do I know?' Caroline said. 'It all depends, does it not?'

'True that, true that,' the Colonel said. ‘I guess this is goodbye for now then.’

'I suppose so,' Caroline said.

'Take care of yourself,’ the Colonel said. ‘Do not take any risks.’

He took her hand, lifted it slowly up to his mouth and kissed the inside of her wrist.

'When you come back, and this is done with,' he said, ‘let us have a talk.’

'I will make a note of it in my calendar,’ Caroline said.

Chapter End Notes
‘Do not turn around,’ Louisa commanded. ‘I am going in now.’

‘My dear Louisa, I assure you -’

‘Just do not turn around for a moment!’

‘Louisa, I am standing in front of a mirror right now. I can see you whether I turn around or not. Incidentally, have you gained weight?’

‘I assume Caroline thinks this is funny,’ Louisa said through clenched teeth. ‘And the water is too hot too.’

‘I am sorry, you were saying?’ her husband, who was concentrating on shaving his throat, said.

‘I assume Caroline thinks it is funny to have us share a room,’ Louisa said. ‘Could you hand me my sponge? I left it on the vanity.’

‘Give me a minute,’ her husband said. ‘Why did you not ask Caroline to alter the arrangements?’

‘What, and cast a shadow of doubt on our marital bliss?’ Louisa snorted. ‘I do not think so!’

‘Well, then, it appears you will have to live with it,’ her husband said.

‘The sponge, Algernon!’

‘Yes, in a minute,’ her husband said. ‘Does that mean you will make me sleep on the couch?’

‘What, and then you keep me awake half the night until you have found a comfortable position? No, I think I had rather have you in bed with me then.’

‘Thank goodness,’ her husband muttered. ‘The couch is at least a foot shorter than I am.’

‘Sponge, Algernon!’

‘Yes, coming,’ Mr Hurst said and tossed the sponge in Louisa’s direction.

Louisa caught it with difficulties.

‘Oh, and the soap, Algernon, please,’ she said. ‘On the vanity. And do not -’

‘ - toss it?’ her husband continued. ‘Too late, I am afraid.’

‘Goodness, have you ever been to a more dreadful place?’ Caroline muttered. ‘I never knew there were so many different sorts of horrid.’

‘It is not *that* bad,’ Mr Darcy muttered.

Caroline let go of his hand and twirled around him in what she hoped looked like a besotted manner.

‘What, then, is not *that* bad?’ she asked when the dance next led them together.

‘Err -’
The fact that Charles has managed to charm yet another poor girl whose heart he will break in a couple of weeks? That somebody stepped on the hem of my gown and did not even have the decency to apologise? Or that this fiddle is so horribly mis-tuned my ears seem to be bleeding?"

‘Well, you may have a point,’ Mr Darcy admitted.

‘And there is no one here apart from you with whom I would even care to dance,’ Caroline said. ‘When I think that only a couple of days ago, I was peacefully strolling through the park with your cousin – and now I am here, in Meryton, Hertfordshire, at this godforsaken assembly.’

‘I did not exactly ask to be dragged here either,’ Mr Darcy said when he had finished turning around a lady in a pale yellow gown. ‘And I can think of very many things I would much rather do.’

‘God, did you hear that woman shriek just now? I think I am getting a headache,’ Caroline whispered.

The dance had by now ended and they were again standing side by side in a corner.

‘I think she wants me to marry one of her daughters,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘She keeps pushing them at me.’

‘The hardship!’ Caroline said. ‘Really, I would pity you, if only I had the time while I am acting like you are a divine gift to women.’

‘Oh, no, there is Charles,’ Mr Darcy muttered. ‘I think he wants me to dance.’

‘Horrid thought,’ Caroline said. ‘What a dreadful prospect. Well, enjoy yourself. I am going to talk to Louisa.’

‘So, what are your plans for the day?’ Caroline asked Mr Darcy as they were strolling through the garden. ‘I heard you were going out.’

‘We have been invited by the officers,’ Mr Darcy said and grimaced. ‘And my cousin just sent a letter; he thinks it is an excellent idea to get Hurst drunk and make him talk.’

‘Hurst is constantly drunk and never talks,’ Caroline snorted. ‘Did your cousin say anything else?’

‘Not really,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘He has not found out anything else, if that is what you mean.’

‘Oh, I just thought -’

‘No, unfortunately, there is nothing new,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘We are still stuck here.’

‘He said nothing about our returning to town then?’ Caroline asked.

‘He did not even mention it,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Easy enough for him, he is not in Hertfordshire.’

‘Yes, he is in London,’ Caroline agreed.

‘He did ask me to convey his regards to you, though,’ Mr Darcy added.

‘Did he?’

‘Yes, something about telling you to keep up the good work,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘He is really impressed with your role-playing.’
‘Oh, is he?’

‘And he asked me to tell you you would probably be very busy the day you returned to London,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘He said many of your friends would probably miss you and wish to call on you when you returned. I know Georgiana will want to see you.’

‘That is – very kind of your sister,’ Caroline said.

‘What then are your plans for the day?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘Oh, Louisa and I are going to invite Jane Bennet,’ Caroline said. ‘Poor girl.’

‘Is she? Why would that be?’

‘Well, with that family,’ Caroline said. ‘The mother! And the sisters! And, you know, Charles is probably going to break her heart in a couple of weeks – he is my brother and I love him dearly, but – anyway, Louisa and I thought we might give her some subtle hints not to get her hopes up. She is a sweet girl and we would hate to see her disappointed.’

‘I would not worry about that,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I think her family is more in love with your brother than she is.’

‘Do you think so?’ Caroline asked. ‘It would make things easier, that is for sure.’

‘You are not asking Elizabeth Bennet to come as well, are you?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘Whom? Oh, no. I thought about it, but it would look odd. After all, she is supposed to be my rival, is she not?’

‘Your what?’

‘Oh, have I not told you?’ Caroline said and snorted. ‘Oh, it is too precious. Now, listen to this: Remember, when I was annoying you to no end at that one party and you made some remark about Eliza Bennet’s eyes just to shut me up? Well, Louisa overheard you and she warned me not to let Eliza get too close to you, for she thought you had already half fallen for her.’

‘Did she now?’

‘Yes, is it not priceless?’ Caroline laughed. ‘I mean, to be sure, Eliza is a sweet girl, and will make an excellent wife to whatever vicar or squire she marries, but the thought that you were falling for her – well, you must admit, it is too funny – anyway, that is why I think I should appear not to like Eliza Bennet, at least as long as Louisa is present, because I absolutely could not dissuade her of that notion.’

Mr Darcy remarked that the weather was likely to turn and they had better go indoors.

Louisa was still up when her husband returned that night; she was sitting in bed and reading a rather thick book.

‘You are late,’ she pointed out. ‘Did you have fun?’

‘Definitely not,’ Mr Hurst said.

He pointed at the unoccupied side of the bed.
‘May I?’

‘Do not be ridiculous, Algernon,’ Louisa said. ‘That is your bed as well as mine, you do not need to ask.’

‘A gentleman always asks,’ Mr Hurst said before letting himself fall, fully clothed, onto the bed.

‘That bad?’ Louisa asked.

‘Someone kept refilling my glass until it was too much even for me,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘Darcy kept shooting dark looks at me, Colonel Foster told crude jokes and the food was inedible.’

‘That bad,’ Louisa said. ‘Oh, dear.’

‘And your brother sang,’ Mr Hurst added. ‘Something about a dead bunny.’

‘He did not,’ Louisa said.

‘I am afraid he did,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘All the way home.’

Louisa stifled a giggle.

‘I hope he has stopped singing now,’ she said. ‘He will wake Jane if he is too loud.’

‘Jane?’ Mr Hurst asked. ‘Which Jane?’

‘You know,’ Louisa said. ‘Jane Bennet. Blonde, rather plump, sweet face? Caroline and I had invited her over.’

‘To spend the night?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘No, of course not,’ Louisa said. ‘The point was for her to be here when Charles was not, so we could give her some gentle hints not to have any expectations.’

Mr Hurst gave his wife a pointed look.

‘Well, maybe not very gentle,’ Louisa said. ‘We had to be pretty direct, I am afraid. And we might have succeeded, I believe, but -’

‘But -?’

‘But the silly girl came here on horseback and got thoroughly soaked,’ Louisa sighed. ‘I am not sure if she even listened to what Caroline and I said; she was already in a rather bad way when she arrived here. I do not know what she thought, riding here in the rain. Although I strongly suspect that was rather more her mother’s idea than her own.’

Mr Hurst raised an eyebrow.

‘She must have intended for Jane to stay of course,’ Louisa explained. ‘But now the poor girl has a dreadful cold and looks disgusting – puffy eyes, runny nose, blotched face – we may have to call for the apothecary tomorrow if she does not get better. Her mama cannot have wanted that.’

‘Well, you know, Louisa, some match-makers,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘They are simply desperate.’

‘Do you mean either of us?’ Louisa snapped. ‘I would never send out Caroline in the rain -’
‘Calm yourself, Lou,’ her husband said. ‘I was speaking of mothers. Mine was the same.’

‘You have a mother?’ Louisa asked.

‘It sounds impossible, but yes, I too once had a mother,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘What are you reading?’

‘A novel,’ Louisa said. ‘Frightfully exciting. You would not like it.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ her husband said. ‘It looks familiar. Have you read it before?’

‘Matthew lent it to me,’ Louisa said. ‘He said I simply had to read it, that I would not be able to put it down once I had started it.’

‘Do not believe a word he told you,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘He could put it down easily enough when he read it.’

‘Louisa, dearest, could I talk to you for a moment?’ Mr Hurst said a couple of days later over breakfast.

‘Certainly, Algie,’ Louisa said and followed her husband out of the room.

Once they had reached the privacy of Louisa’s own room, Louisa asked, ‘What is it?’

‘I just received this letter,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘So I saw,’ Louisa said. ‘What does it say?’

‘I simply do not understand it,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘You have had Mr Darcy under close observation, have you not?’

‘I have,’ Louisa said, ‘and whenever I was not near him, Charles or Caroline were with him, I made sure of that.’

‘And still,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘I am informed that another shipment has been sent. It must be meant for him.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ Louisa asked.

‘It is being sent to Meryton,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘That certainly is too great a coincidence. No, I am sure, Mr Darcy is at the core of this. If you cannot think of any opportunity he has had to be alone for long enough to set everything up, then it follows that one or both of your siblings are his allies.’

‘No!’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘No, I refuse to believe that! Charles – I am sure he could never -’

‘It was not him I suspected either,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘But Caroline?’ Louisa said. ‘No, it is impossible!’

‘Still, it would explain why sometimes, Mr Darcy seems to appreciate her advances, and sometimes, he does not,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Oh, that,’ Louisa said. ‘He is a man. Inconstancy does not signify anything.’

‘Thank you,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Still, unless you can think of anything else, I fear that we must include your sister -’
‘Wait,’ Louisa said. ‘Wait.’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you recall Saturday afternoon?’ Louisa said.

‘Vaguely,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘We had pork for dinner, had we not?’

‘Oh, what do I know,’ Louisa said. ‘Anyway, in the afternoon, both Mr Darcy and Miss Eliza Bennet were alone in the library for quite some time.’

‘Miss Eliza Bennet?’ Mr Hurst said, frowning.

‘You know, Jane Bennet’s sister,’ Louisa said. ‘Brown hair, straight teeth, does not like cards?’

‘Oh, that sister,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘So she was alone with Darcy?’

‘Yes,’ Louisa said. ‘Maybe she is the one with whom he works.’

‘Hm,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘It could be. I cannot rule it out. Although, would it not be too great a coincidence for her to live in the very town Darcy decides to visit?’

‘Oh, that,’ Louisa said. ‘That is easily explained. It was, after all, someone recommended by Mr Darcy who told Charles to take Netherfield. Nothing would have been easier than to gently steer Charles in the right direction.’

‘You have a point there,’ Mr Hurst conceded. ‘We should keep an eye on her.’

‘I always thought that Mr Darcy was behaving strangely around her,’ Louisa said, ‘but now that would explain everything.’

‘Still,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘we cannot rule Caroline out.’

‘It is not Caroline, I am sure about that,’ Louisa said.

‘We may know more when the shipment has arrived,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘We may be able to make a capture then.’

‘When will it come?’ Louisa asked.

‘It cannot be long now,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘All will be over before Christmas, I think.’

‘And then,’ Louisa said slowly, ‘then you will die?’

‘Then I will die,’ Mr Hurst said.

He got up and patted Louisa’s cheek.

‘I shall miss you, Lou,’ he said and left the room.

‘Yes, me too,’ Louisa muttered.
Louisa Is Shocked

‘Such splendid weather,’ Mr Darcy said when Louisa and her husband had left the breakfast parlour.

‘It is raining,’ Charles said, frowning.

‘Oh, only very slightly,’ Mr Darcy said.

In the distance, they could hear the thunder rumbling.

‘I am sure a little rain would actually be refreshing,’ Caroline said. ‘Would you accompany me outside, Mr Darcy?’

‘It will be a pleasure,’ Mr Darcy said, getting up and offering his arm to Caroline.

‘Let me just get my shawl,’ Caroline said.

She hastily ran upstairs and was about to enter her room when she heard her sister and Mr Hurst talking in Louisa’s room. She pressed her ear to the door but could only make out a few words, so she gave up the attempt. In her room, she quickly dressed and was back downstairs before Mr Hurst left the room. Mr Darcy was already waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

‘There have been new developments,’ Mr Darcy said when they were outside and away from the house. ‘I just had a letter from town.’

‘Do you mean the shipment that is expected in Meryton?’ Caroline asked.

‘What do you know about it?’ Mr Darcy asked sharply.

‘I heard Louisa and Mr Hurst talking about it just now,’ Caroline said. ‘I could not make out much, but I think he told Louisa that a shipment had been sent and that it was to arrive in Meryton.’

‘That is indeed the information we also have,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Well, this proves that Mr Hurst is involved in the whole business. It would be too much of a coincidence if there were another, innocent shipment expected in Meryton –’

‘Yes, but Louisa!’ Caroline said. ‘This also proves that Louisa is involved in this whole business – I cannot believe it of her –’

‘Remember what my cousin said,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Louisa is most probably acting under pressure.’

‘Has he found out anything more about Mr Aldridge?’ Caroline asked.

‘Nothing conclusive,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘It is not easy to find out for certain where Mr Aldridge was a decade ago, but it is definitely possible they met. Something must have happened between Mr Aldridge and Louisa that gives Mr Hurst a hold over them.’

‘I would never have thought it of Louisa,’ Caroline said.

‘She was only fifteen,’ Mr Darcy said softly. ‘So many of us make mistakes at that age.’

‘Poor Louisa,’ Caroline said. ‘That this should haunt her the rest of her life –’

‘Poor Louisa indeed,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘One single mistake –’
‘We must free her of that man,’ Caroline said. ‘When is the shipment due?’

‘We do not know precisely,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘but we suspect it will arrive before November is over.’

‘What will we do about it?’ Caroline asked.

‘We must intercept it,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘replace it with an identical one and see who comes to pick it up.’

‘Intercept it?’ Caroline said. ‘But – where?’

‘In London,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘We have received intelligence that it will be deposited in a certain warehouse and only be picked up twelve hours later. That gives us enough time to intercept it. My cousin will take care of that.’

‘Oh,’ Caroline said. ‘What if he is seen?’

‘He is willing to take that risk,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘Oh.’

‘He will be armed, of course,’ Mr Darcy said.

Caroline drew her shawl closer around herself.

‘Are you alright?’ Mr Darcy asked. ‘It is rather cold, is it not? We had perhaps better return indoors.’

‘Yes,’ Caroline agreed. ‘I just remembered I wanted to write a letter.’

____________________

**Dear Lady Julia,**

*I only realise now I forgot to thank you for all the kindnesses you bestowed upon me when last I was in London; it is with a very guilty conscience that I pick up my pen and beg your forgiveness for my oversight. Your friendship is very much appreciated by me and I must assure you that I had a wonderful time with you and your family.*

*They will, I hope, be well, just as you. Please convey my special regards to your son; it was a delight to meet him. Your brother asked me for a list of musical pieces which I have enclosed in this letter. If you could find the time to pass it on to him I would be very thankful.*

*I am, as you have perhaps heard, currently in Hertfordshire, near Meryton – quite a charming rural town, although I do miss London and all its excitements ...*

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‘The 26th of November?’ Caroline exclaimed.

‘Shh,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Not so loud!’

They were both ready to claim they had been searching for a book, should anybody come upon them in the library. It being the dead of the night, however, they hoped their meeting would remain undetected.

‘The 26th?’ Caroline hissed. ‘But that is the date of Charles’ stupid ball!’

‘I know,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘At least that proves that Charles is not in on this, does it?’
‘Oh, I would not put it past Charles to mix that up,’ Caroline sighed.

‘No, indeed,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘So, the shipment will definitely arrive on the 26th?’ Caroline asked again.

‘All evidence suggests it,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘Oh, but -’ Caroline said, ‘I mean, what if the meeting point is at the other end of the village -’

‘But do you not see?’ Mr Darcy said. ‘It has to be somewhere near here. Mr Hurst knows his absence would be remarked upon, so it has to be somewhere near the house. This is brilliant. When we see him leave, we can just pretend to step out on the terrace and follow him.’

‘But what if someone sees something?’

‘Oh, you know how it is at balls,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘people always claim to see funny things and nobody ever believes them. No, even if someone saw something, they would not recognise it for what it was.’

‘I cannot believe it will all be over in a week,’ Caroline said.

‘Yes, me neither,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘What will you do when we get to leave?’ Caroline asked.

‘I will go up North,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I will stay with Georgiana and our aunt and return with them for Christmas. You will be going to town, I gather?’

‘Yes,’ Caroline said and smiled fondly. ‘There is some business there I need to finish.’

‘Good, good,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I cannot wait to get away.’

‘No, me neither,’ Caroline said, but then her face fell. ‘Oh dear.’

‘What is it?’

‘Louisa,’ Caroline said. ‘What will happen to Louisa?’

‘Well, if she is indeed involved, as we suspect -’

‘She is my sister!’ Caroline said. ‘We cannot send my sister to prison!’

‘But if she is guilty -’

‘I cannot send my sister to prison,’ Caroline said. ‘I cannot do that.’

‘It will probably not come to that.’

‘No?’ Caroline asked.

‘Well, if Louisa is indeed being blackmailed, as we assume -’

‘Of course she is!’ Caroline cried. ‘There is no other explanation for her behaviour.’

‘Well, in that case, we can probably arrange for her not to go to prison,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Provided she is willing to co-operate.’
‘Of course she is,’ Caroline said. ‘She will be only too happy to testify against Mr Hurst, I am certain of that.’

‘Well, in that case,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘you will have nothing to fear.’

‘When?’ Louisa asked her husband the next morning.

‘The night of the ball,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘I have just received the information.’

‘The night of the ball?’ Louisa repeated.

‘Yes,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Excellent, is it not?’

‘Why?’

‘Because nobody will notice a thing with all the commotion going on,’ Mr Hurst explained. ‘Nothing easier than to sneak out for a bit – oh, that was very cleverly arranged by Darcy.’

‘Where is the meeting point then?’ Louisa asked.

‘I do not think it will be very far from the house,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Look here, I made a sketch -’

‘Oh, that is indeed clever,’ Louisa said. ‘Very easy to just slip onto the terrace and -’

‘- and that means that it could even be your sister who arranged every thing,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘I assure you, Caroline is innocent,’ Louisa said. ‘I will prove that. I will observe every single of her steps from now until the ball, and I shall show you that she is innocent.’

‘Nobody could be happier to see that than me,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘We will have to see.’

‘And you will see once the ball is over,’ Louisa said determinedly.

‘Well, that means you will be rid of me in about a week,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Do you know what you will do once the formalities are dealt with?’

‘The formalities?’ Louisa asked.

‘Well, there will have to be a funeral, of course,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘And the will must be read and all that.’

‘Funeral?’ Louisa echoed.

‘It would not do to let the corpse just lie around,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Especially since its head will have been shot off – Louisa, are you going to faint again?’

‘No, I am not going to faint,’ Louisa said, although she felt a bit unsteady.

‘That is a relief,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘You are not going to shoot your own head off, are you?’ Louisa asked.

‘Do not be ridiculous, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Of course not. What would be the point of that?’

‘But you said there would be a body -’
‘Yes, well,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘The charm of a headless body is that nobody can identify it.’

‘Christian, do not tell me you are going to shoot some peasant’s head off!’ Louisa shrieked. ‘I mean – that is illegal. I am pretty sure it is illegal to shoot peasants.’

‘Oh, it is illegal, that is for sure, but it would not be the only crime on my conscience, now would it?’

‘You – you cannot be serious,’ Louisa said.

‘I am deadly serious, it is absolutely illegal to shoot a peasant,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Now, would you mind not shouting?’

‘But – but -’

‘Calm yourself, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I will not kill anyone, peasant or else. Believe me, the poor bloke will be quite dead – of natural causes, I assure you – before his head is shot off.’

‘Oh,’ Louisa said.

‘Really, Louisa,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Do you really think I would shoot somebody’s head off? Do you still know me so little?’

‘I am sorry,’ Louisa said. ‘I did not think.’

‘Miss Bingley!’ Mr Darcy exclaimed. ‘What are you -’

‘I apologise,’ Caroline said and turned around. ‘I had no idea -’

Mr Darcy quickly buttoned his shirt.

‘You can turn around again,’ he said.

‘I am so, so sorry,’ Caroline said. ‘I assure you, I did not mean to intrude -’

‘How may I help you, Miss Bingley?’ Mr Darcy asked while he put on his waistcoat.

‘Where is your man?’ Caroline asked. ‘Does he not normally dress you?’

‘He forgot my boots downstairs,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘May I ask, though, Miss Bingley, why you stormed into my room this early in the morning and cried you needed to speak to me?’

‘Louisa,’ Caroline said. ‘And Mr Hurst. They are going to shoot somebody.’

‘They are what?’ Mr Darcy said, frowning.

‘They are going to shoot somebody,’ Caroline said. ‘I just heard them talking in Louisa’s room. Louisa cried that it would be illegal to shoot somebody, and then Mr Hurst said that would not be the only crime on his conscience, and Louisa said he could not be serious – the rest, I could not understand.’

‘Hm,’ Mr Darcy said, tying his neck-cloth.

‘Mr Darcy, we must do something!’ Caroline said. ‘We cannot let them shoot people!’

‘You must have misunderstood them,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I am sure they would not -’
‘Do not tell me you are going to shoot some person’s head off,’ Caroline quoted. ‘Those were Louisa’s very words. Do you think I only made this up?’

‘No, of course not,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I believe you.’

‘Well, then, what are we going to do?’ Caroline asked.

‘What can we do?’ Mr Darcy said. ‘We can only do what we have been doing the last weeks: observe them closely and make sure they cannot harm anybody else.’

‘And the guns?’ Caroline said. ‘There is a room full of guns in this house!’

‘I have the key to that,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Charles left it in my care.’

‘That is at least a little relief,’ Caroline said.

‘Nevertheless, I want you to be careful,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Your task is to gather information, not to apprehend anybody. Stay with Louisa. See what you can find out – if you see or hear anything that is potentially dangerous, call Charles or me, will you?’

‘Yes, if you insist,’ Caroline said.

‘Good,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘If that is all, I will see you at breakfast in a couple of minutes. You had better leave before my man comes back.’

‘Good morning, Caroline,’ Louisa said pleasantly when Caroline sat down. ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Tolerably, yes, thank you,’ Caroline said. ‘How are you this morning?’

‘Quite well,’ Louisa said. ‘I say, Caroline -’

She lowered her voice to a stage whisper.

‘- did I see you entering Mr Darcy’s room just now?’

‘Mr Darcy’s room!’ Caroline exclaimed. ‘Oh, yes. I found one of his kerchiefs on the floor and thought his man had probably dropped it.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Louisa said. ‘I knew there would be an innocent explanation.’

She gave Caroline a wink.

‘Louisa!’ Caroline exclaimed, then recovered and said, ‘it was of course all very innocent, you know me, Louisa.’

‘Bacon is almost cold,’ Mr Hurst muttered.

‘I do not know what you mean,’ Caroline said. ‘It has just the right temperature.’

‘The ham is over-cooked,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘I like my ham well done,’ Caroline said.

‘What are you planning to do today?’ Louisa asked quickly.

‘I still need to consult with Mrs Nicholls about some arrangements for the ball,’ Caroline said. ‘I
would be grateful if you could help me with that, Louisa.’

‘Of course, of course,’ Louisa said. ‘And you should also make a choice regarding the music. If you wish, I could assist you with that, too.’

‘That would be lovely,’ Caroline said. ‘I would really appreciate that.’
‘Can I ask you a question?’ Louisa said that evening when they were lying in bed and had blown out the candles.

‘It appears you can,’ her husband said gruffly.

‘No, I mean, a real question,’ Louisa amended.

Her husband sighed, then turned over so he would face her.

‘What is it, Lou?’ he said.

‘I have been wondering -’ Louisa began. ‘Why did you fall in love with Matthew?’

‘Heavens, Lou,’ her husband groaned. ‘One does not plan to fall in love; I cannot advise you how to go about it.’

‘That is not what I mean and you know it,’ Louisa said.

‘Do I?’

‘You are evading my question,’ Louisa said. ‘If you do not want to tell me, fine, but there is no need to play silly games with me.’

Her husband pondered this for a while.

‘Maybe you are right,’ he finally said.

‘Well, then, do you want to talk about it, or -’

‘I do not know why it happened,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I could not even precisely say when – one day, I simply realised that he was a constant presence in my life and that I would not have it any other way. He has been there for me in the best of times and in the worst and I would not change one bit about that.’

‘But – did you not have doubts whether it would be right -’

‘Of course I had, Lou, do not be silly,’ her husband said. ‘Let us not forget that we are not talking about love, but about both a crime and a sin – that is not a commitment one enters lightly.’

‘You did though,’ Louisa said.

‘I did,’ her husband said and suddenly chuckled. ‘Dear Jove, I felt like a modern Prometheus – challenging the gods and their seemingly arbitrary laws -’

‘Yes, but why?’

‘Why, why -’ her husband said. ‘Because I could not not do it, that is why. I knew it might destroy me to pursue what I perceived as my happiness, but I also knew that not to pursue it would destroy me for certain.’

‘That bad?’ Louisa asked.
‘That bad,’ Christian said simply.

‘Louisa will not leave me alone,’ Caroline reported to Mr Darcy that night in the library. ‘I know I said I was going to keep her close to keep an eye on her – but this is definitely too close. Wherever I go, she follows me, whatever I do, she does too – I think she knows I know.’

‘Hm,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘I had to check twice she was truly sleeping before I dared come downstairs,’ Caroline said. ‘Thank goodness she snores. What if she found us here?’

‘Hm,’ Mr Darcy said again.

‘What is the matter with you today?’ Caroline hissed. ‘You have not spoken more than two words all evening, and Charles said you were in a foul mood all day.’

Mr Darcy made another angry sound, then apologised to her.

‘I am sorry, my mind was elsewhere,’ he said.

‘Well, my mind was on our mission,’ Caroline said. ‘On what was yours?’

‘I have met someone I would rather not meet,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Someone with whom I have had to deal before.’

Caroline said nothing.

‘It is Mr Wickham, if you must know,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘The son of my father’s steward. I just found out he is to join the militia here in Meryton. He is – well, suffice it to say he is not a very pleasant fellow and has harmed many good and decent people. You should better stay away from him if you have the misfortune to meet him. I cannot think of anyone who has ever benefited from an association with him.’

‘Good,’ Caroline said. ‘I will keep it in mind. Now, can we please come back to the business of Louisa and the guns?’

‘What guns?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘Well, I have no idea,’ Caroline said. ‘But I suppose you need a gun to shoot someone’s head off.’

‘What is the matter with you?’ Louisa inquired of her husband the morning before the ball. ‘Will you not get up?’

‘I just cannot stop thinking,’ Mr Hurst said, still lying on the bed.

‘A dangerous affliction, I am sure,’ Louisa said. ‘Hopefully, it will pass.’

‘No, seriously,’ Mr Hurst said, rubbing his forehead. ‘I feel like I have overseen something.’

‘What would that be?’ Louisa asked.

‘If I knew that!’ Mr Hurst exclaimed. ‘It is just – maybe it is nothing, only -’

‘Yes?’
‘It is all too easy,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Darcy must know someone is onto him by now, even if he does not know it is us. Why would he arrange for a transaction to take place here? He must know it would be so much easier to apprehend someone here than, say, in London.’

‘Are you sure though he knows?’ Louisa said. ‘Perhaps he thinks he has been clever enough.’

‘Oh, believe me, Louisa, he must know,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘He left traces all over the place – he must know what he has done. He probably plans to leave the country when he is done with his work here.’

‘But why did he leave such traces in the first place?’

‘I do not know,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘That is why I am wondering. It almost looks as if it were deliberate. Darcy is too intelligent to leave those traces by mistake. No, it looks almost as if they wanted us to catch up on him ultimately.’

‘They?’ Louisa said.

‘If that were the case, obviously somebody else would have to be involved,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘They may want to unmask Darcy at a latter stage to protect the identity of the others.’

‘They would sacrifice Darcy?’ Louisa asked. ‘But did you not say he was one of the most important informers?’

‘He is,’ Mr Hurst said slowly.

‘But –’

‘Yes!’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I think I have got it!’

‘What?’

‘If they would sacrifice Darcy to protect someone else, it follows that that someone is even more important than Darcy – Louisa, that’s it!’

Mr Hurst jumped out of the bed and kissed Louisa full on the lips.

‘I think I have it, Louisa!’

Louisa stood there completely confounded. Finally, she managed a weak, ‘What?’

‘I think I know who the head of the operation is!’

Suddenly, Mr Hurst stopped dead in his tracks.

‘What is it, Christian?’ Louisa asked again.

‘Sweet Jove,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘If I am right – and I hope I am not – then this is much more dangerous than I thought.’

‘What are you going to do now?’ Louisa said.

‘I must write a letter,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Ink – where is the ink – and my quill?’

Louisa handed him the missing items.
'I hope I am not too late,' Mr Hurst said. ‘And I hope even more that I am mistaken.’

He began penning the letter feverishly.

‘Just in case, Louisa,’ he said and looked up. ‘Do you think you could get a weapon from the gun-room?’

‘Now, remember,’ Mr Darcy said to Caroline before they went down the stairs together. ‘We keep an eye on both Louisa and Mr Hurst and when either or both of them leave the ballroom, we follow.’

‘I know,’ Caroline said. ‘We have been over this at least thrice. If I need to leave the room, I will say I need to speak to cook, if I need you to come with me, I will ask you to take me outside because it is too hot inside. I will not follow them on my own, I will not take any risks -’

‘That is right, you will not,’ Mr Darcy said grimly. ‘Especially because I think one of the guns is missing.’

‘What?’ Caroline shrieked.

‘Be quiet,’ Mr Darcy hissed. ‘Someone will hear you.’

‘A gun – gone?’ Caroline gulped.

‘I think so,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘But that does not have to mean anything.’

‘But what if Mr Hurst – or Louisa -’

‘Now, calm yourself,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘they will hardly carry that on their person, now, will they?’

‘Yes, but -’

‘I probably just miscounted,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Nevertheless, I do not want you to take any risks.’

‘I promise, I will be careful,’ Caroline said, trying to forget about the gun.

‘I see we understand each other,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘Very well. May I ask for the first dance?’

‘You may,’ Caroline said. ‘Unless I need to speak to cook, of course.’

They arrived downstairs to find Charles already there.

‘Everything looks splendid,’ he said. ‘Caroline, you have outdone yourself!’

‘Louisa did most of that,’ Caroline admitted. ‘I only helped.’

‘I cannot wait!’ Charles exclaimed. ‘I just know everything is going to be fabulous.’

‘Of course,’ Caroline said weakly.

‘Was that a carriage?’ Charles asked. ‘Did you hear a carriage already? It did sound like the Bennets’ carriage, did it not?’

He rushed over to a window.

‘It really is time we returned to town,’ Caroline whispered to Mr Darcy, ‘before Charles breaks poor Jane Bennet’s heart, or she his.’
'Did you say something about town?' Charles called from the window. ‘That reminds me, I am riding into town early tomorrow morning. I had some pesky letters this morning, apparently I forgot to see my lawyer about some business – anyway, it should not take me longer than two or three days to settle, so there is no need for you to accompany me – oh, I think there is a carriage coming!’

Louisa dismissed her maid, inspected her appearance one last time in the mirror and decided she looked as well as she could.

‘I hid the gun in the library, in the window-seat,’ she said to her husband. ‘Just as you suggested.’

‘Did you have any trouble getting it?’

‘No,’ Louisa said. ‘Darcy has the key of course, but it turned out Mrs Nicholls has duplicates for all the keys in the house. I do not think Darcy realised that.’

‘Excellent,’ Mr Hurst said and gave his tie one last glance.

‘Shall we go downstairs, then?’ Louisa asked. ‘Are you ready?’

‘One moment, please, Louisa,’ her husband said.

‘Of course,’ Louisa said. ‘What is it?’

Mr Hurst took a bundle of letters tightly bound together with black ribbon out of a drawer and pressed them into her hands.

‘I had no right to them in the first place,’ he said. ‘I want you to have them back.’

‘My letters,’ Louisa muttered. ‘But -’

‘Keep them, burn them, whatever you want,’ Mr Hurst said.

Louisa said nothing, but stuffed the packet of letters into a drawer of her vanity table.

‘I want to apologise,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘What for?’

‘Blackmailing you with them,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘That was not fair of me.’

‘No, it was not,’ Louisa agreed.

‘I am sorry for using that against you,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘I simply should have explained the situation to you and hoped for your help.’

‘You could have done that,’ Louisa said.

‘It was stupid of me,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘And despicable to use you like that. Honestly, Louisa, I am sorry.’

‘It is alright,’ Louisa said. ‘I understand.’

‘The only thing I can say in my defense is that I would not have made good on my threat,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘You must believe me when I tell you I would not have done that.’

‘I know,’ Louisa said. ‘Shall we go downstairs, then?’
'Yes, let us,’ Mr Hurst agreed. ‘Thank you, for everything, Louisa. No matter how this evening ends, I want you to know that I am truly grateful for your friendship these past months.’

‘You are welcome,’ Louisa said and took his arm. ‘Incidentally, why did you choose to apologise tonight? Did Matthew -’

‘He may have suggested it in his letter this morning,’ her husband admitted. ‘But I had come to the same conclusion by then.’

Louisa only smiled.

‘May I ask for the first dance?’ Mr Hurst asked as they stepped into the ballroom.

‘You may,’ Louisa said. ‘I shall be delighted to dance with you.’
‘Mr Hurst has just gone over to those French doors,’ Caroline whispered into Mr Darcy’s ear.

‘Where?’

‘Over there,’ Caroline hissed. ‘If you step over to where Miss Lucas and Miss Bennet are talking, you can see him.’

She gave him a gentle push in the back and watched him stumbling over to the two ladies. Mr Darcy quickly talked to them, looking around in the room while he did so, then came over again to Caroline.

‘And?’ Caroline asked.

‘I think I have just asked Miss Bennet to dance,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘And Mr Hurst?’ Caroline insisted.

‘Oh, he is standing there at the window and drinking punch,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘You should keep an eye on him while I dance with Miss Bennet.’

‘You are too funny!’ Caroline exclaimed and laughed. ‘Oh, Mr Darcy!’

Mr Darcy was about to ask what she meant when he realised that two officers were walking past them within hearing distance.

‘If you ask me, there is a lady involved, if you catch my drift,’ one of them remarked.

‘Well, Wickham claimed it was urgent business that made him go to town,’ the other said and snickered.

Caroline saw Mr Darcy turning red again. She thought it best not to mention that Jane Bennet had also been wondering about Mr Wickham’s absence and had asked Caroline if she could say anything about Mr Wickham’s history with Mr Darcy. Jane Bennet seemed to be under the impression that Mr Darcy had used Mr Wickham very ill; it was a business about which Caroline knew nothing but which she could not believe to be true, especially keeping Mr Darcy’s remarks in mind. It was perhaps better, she thought, not to trouble Mr Darcy with these unpleasant news.

‘I think you are to dance, Mr Darcy,’ she said. ‘Enjoy yourself, I will keep watch.’

Mr Hurst moved away from the window and sought his wife in the crowd.

‘Mr Darcy is dancing,’ he whispered into her ear.

‘I know,’ Louisa said gleefully. ‘With Eliza Bennet. I told you Caroline was innocent.’

‘We will see,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Look, they are talking,’ Louisa said. ‘I am sure they are finalising everything now.’

‘You may be right,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Keep an eye on them. I will see if anything else of interest is happening.’
When the dance had ended, Louisa walked over to her sister.

‘I see Mr Darcy danced with Eliza Bennet,’ she remarked.

‘Yes, I believe so,’ Caroline said, distracted. A vague idea had been forming in her mind.

‘Are you not quite jealous?’ Louisa said.

‘What?’ Caroline said. ‘Oh, of course I am. Nasty little minx, she is.’

‘They seemed quite close,’ Louisa said.

‘Hm,’ Caroline said. ‘I had perhaps better speak to her.’

‘Speak to her?’ Louisa said. ‘Caro, what are you up to?’

Caroline did not answer her but instead walked over to Elizabeth Bennet. She had meant to speak more freely, but Louisa was still listening, so Caroline had to keep her warning rather vague. Elizabeth Bennet seemed not to be very grateful, but Caroline could not afford to worry about this right now.

‘Oh, I love how you gave her a set-down,’ Louisa said when they walked away again. ‘Who is this Mr Wickham anyway? Is he here tonight?’

‘No, he is not,’ Caroline said slowly.

‘But we did extend the invitation to all the officers, did we not?’ Louisa asked. ‘I am quite sure I told Charles not to forget it.’

‘It was,’ Caroline said. ‘But apparently Mr Wickham chose not to attend.’

‘Oh, well,’ Louisa said. ‘He probably thought there was something more worth his time. I say, Caroline – Caroline?’

Caroline did not heed to her sister.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘I feel rather faint. I think I had better catch some fresh air.’

‘Of course,’ Louisa said. ‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘No, thank you,’ Caroline said. ‘Stay here and enjoy yourself. I see Mr Darcy at the French window over there; he will step out with me for a moment.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Louisa said. ‘Let me know if there is anything I can do.’

‘What is it?’ Mr Darcy asked when Caroline had dragged him outside.

‘Mr Wickham,’ Caroline hissed. ‘Mr Wickham!’

‘What has he done now?’ Mr Darcy groaned. ‘Will I never have peace from that scumbag, that absolute –’

‘Mr Wickham is the one Hurst is meeting,’ Caroline hissed.

‘He what?’
‘Do you not see it?’ Caroline said. ‘It all fits! Mr Wickham arrived here just a week before the shipment was due; Mr Wickham is not here tonight even though he was invited – he is not here tonight whilst everyone else is here and he will be unobserved – Mr Wickham is close enough to you to be able to assume your identity.’

Mr Darcy groaned.

‘It must be him!’ Caroline said. ‘Why else would he come to Meryton so suddenly – to join a regiment? There must be dozens of regiments with much more prestige in England surely.’

Mr Darcy did not speak. In the moonlight, Caroline could see his lips were firmly pressed together.

‘It simply must be Mr Wickham,’ Caroline said. ‘It is him Mr Hurst is meeting tonight. They are in on this together!’

‘Yes, maybe,’ Mr Darcy said slowly. ‘Maybe you are right.’

‘What are we going to do now?’ Caroline said.

‘It is too late to do anything,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘We can do nothing but wait now and see what happens.’

‘I feared you would say that,’ Caroline said. ‘I just hoped there would be something we could do.’

‘No, unfortunately not,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I am sorry. Shall we go inside again?’

Caroline took Mr Darcy’s arm and they made their way inside again.

‘I think that man is wanting to speak to you,’ Caroline said.

‘What man?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘The fat man in black coming straight towards you, waving his arms and yelling your name,’ Caroline said.

‘Oh. That man.’

‘Exactly,’ Caroline said. ‘If you would excuse me, I think I need to be at the other side of the room.’

‘It definitely is Eliza Bennet,’ Louisa whispered in her husband’s ear during dinner. ‘Did you notice how Darcy will not leave her alone? He must be waiting for a signal.’

Mr Hurst only nodded in agreement and then remarked loudly about the quality of the beef.

After dinner, some of the daughters of the neighbourhood were asked to provide for some musical entertainment and readily provided it.

‘I think Mary Bennet is involved as well,’ Louisa said to her husband.

‘What makes you think that?’ her husband whispered.

‘Nobody would sing in public if they were that bad unless they had to,’ Louisa said. ‘I think she is giving the signal. And I think I know what it is.’

‘How so?’
'Did you pay any attention to the words?’ Louisa asked.

‘My dear, I was busy pretending I was deaf,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Well, it was something about a maid meeting her love in a bower near a river. Thus -’

‘There is a small sort of stream not far from the house,’ Mr Hurst agreed.

‘So there!’ Louisa said. ‘That is the meeting point.’

‘Either you are completely mad, Louisa,’ her husband said. ‘Or you are right.’

‘Such a shame her father made her not sing that last song,’ Louisa said. ‘I am sure that would have settled the matter.’

‘Do you think Eliza Bennet might be somehow involved in this whole business?’ Caroline asked Mr Darcy.

‘Miss Bennet!’ Mr Darcy exclaimed. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘Well, Mr Hurst and Louisa keep watching her,’ Caroline said, ‘as if they were waiting for some kind of signal from her. And I heard that she was rather friendly with Wickham, too -’

‘No, I do not think that,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘She is definitely not involved in anything. If the Hursts keep observing her, it can only mean she is in some sort of danger.’

‘What sort of danger?’ Caroline said. ‘You said yourself they were probably not armed.’

‘But that was before you said they were observing her -’

‘Then maybe you should better keep an eye on her, to make sure she is safe,’ Caroline said tersely. ‘Meanwhile, I will try to find out where Mr Hurst plans to pick up the shipment tonight.’

‘Yes, let us do that,’ Mr Darcy said.

He was following Elizabeth Bennet back into the ball room before Caroline could say anything else.

Louisa made her way over to her sister.

‘Who was that odious man?’ Louisa asked.

‘Which one?’ Caroline asked back.

‘Oh, you know,’ Louisa said. ‘The fat, pompous one, who kept going on and on about Mr Darcy’s aunt and his own humble profession – I take it he is some sort of clergyman?’

‘Oh, that one,’ Caroline said. ‘He has been pestering Mr Darcy all evening, I fear. I gather Lady Catherine granted him a living some time this year.’

‘Did we invite him?’ Louisa said, frowning. ‘Why would we do that?’

‘Unfortunately, he also is a cousin of the Bennet girls,’ Caroline said. ‘And of course we had to invite them.’

She rolled her eyes.
‘I have been meaning to have a word with you about them, by the way,’ she said.

‘Oh?’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Caroline said. ‘I do not think we can allow this to continue.’

She nudged her head in the direction of Charles and the eldest Miss Bennet, who were earnestly talking to each other in a corner of the room.

‘If we allow this to take its natural course,’ Caroline said, ‘one or both of them is going to end up heartbroken.’

‘You think so?’ Louisa asked.

‘Oh, yes,’ Caroline said. ‘It is obvious that while Jane likes Charles, she is not in love with him; he, on the other hand, is smitten now, but you know how it is with him – I do not think it will last until Christmas. No, I think we had better act now. If we allow this to continue, the mother will probably force a wedding, and I do not think either of them would benefit from such a union. They are too different in background and social standing; they could never be happy with each other once the initial attraction was gone.’

‘Hmm,’ Louisa said. Her views on marriage had been quite dramatically altered by her own experiences.

‘Besides,’ Caroline added, ‘would you really want Charles to have such a mother-in-law?’

‘Lord, no,’ Louisa said. ‘I had rather it be Georgiana Cavendish than her!’

Both sisters laughed. Caroline realised that they had not laughed so freely together for a very long time. The joke itself became unimportant compared to the momentary delight she felt at the return of her companionship with her sister.

The Bennet family were the last to leave; when their carriage was finally departing, the Eastern horizon was already pink. Charles, who needed to get up early to ride to town that day, excused himself, but Caroline, Mr Darcy and the Hursts opted to have a last round of drinks in the salon.

‘I will help you with those glasses, Mr Darcy,’ Caroline said, then whispered, ‘well, then?’

‘Well, what?’ Mr Darcy hissed.

‘What has happened?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What do we do now?’

‘I have no bloody idea,’ Mr Darcy hissed.

Louisa and Mr Hurst were having a similar whispered conversation on one of the sofas until Caroline stepped over to hand them their drinks.

‘Scotch for you, Mr Hurst,’ she said, ‘and your brandy, Louisa.’

There was a knock on one of the French doors and everybody turned towards it. The door then opened and a voice said, ‘I am sorry to trouble you at such a late hour – may I enter nevertheless?’
Louisa jumped, Caroline cried, ‘the shipment!’ and Mr Hurst cursed and dropped his glass.

The new-comer stepped out from behind the curtains and into the room.

‘You!’ Mr Darcy exclaimed. ‘What are you doing here?’
Louisa Catches a Spy

‘Colonel Fitzwilliam!’ Caroline exclaimed and with trembling knees sat down.

‘It is you then!’ Louisa cried. ‘It is you, and not Mr Darcy, who is the spy!’

‘I am no spy!’ Mr Darcy said haughtily. ‘Your husband is the spy, Mrs Hurst!’

‘Colonel Fitzwilliam!’ Caroline said again.

To everybody’s surprise, Colonel Fitzwilliam saluted to Mr Hurst.

‘I apologise, Colonel,’ he said. ‘I only learnt about your involvement in this affair last night - I had no idea who you were.’

‘Of course not,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘That is the whole idea of an under-cover identity, now is it? How did you find out?’

‘There is no time to explain everything,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘Suffice it to say Lord Hawkesbury contacted me when he received your letter, and he asked me to show you this.’

From his pocket, he drew a letter, unfolded it and showed it to Mr Hurst. Mr Hurst read it, paled slightly and nodded.

‘That is what I feared. Good thing Hawkesbury acted so quickly – and you, too, Colonel,’ he said. ‘Good to have you on board.’

‘Wait!’ both Louisa and Caroline exclaimed. ‘What is going on here?’

‘No time for explanations,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘The Colonel and I must be off.’

‘Wait – wait a moment,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘So Hurst has not been stealing my identity after all?’

‘Of course not! I was trying to apprehend you,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Now, Colonel, where are we going?’

‘To catch the spy, of course,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘And we must make haste. I have already arranged for the carriage, if you would come with me, Colonel.’

‘I demand an explanation!’ Mr Darcy said.

‘No time now.’

‘Then I will accompany you,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘You can explain in the carriage. Let me just get my gun.’

‘Well then.’

The three gentlemen left the room.

‘So you knew then.’

‘And you knew that I knew.’

‘I say, Caro, did you think I was the spy?’
‘Lou, you must have thought I was the spy —’

‘You must forgive me, I thought you were —’

‘Forgive me, I thought you were —’

‘I do not know about you,’ Louisa said, ‘but I am not going to stay here. I am going to take my gun and then I want to see how this ends.’

‘The carriage then?’ Caroline said.

‘The carriage,’ Louisa confirmed and they both went after the men.

‘No way,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Under no circumstances,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

‘None whatsoever,’ Mr Darcy added.

‘Louisa and I have had a little chat while you were readying the guns,’ Caroline said.

‘We have exchanged information,’ Louisa said. ‘And we have decided to accompany you. We are armed, so you need not fear for our safety.’

‘We will stay in the carriage if you insist,’ Caroline said. ‘But we want to see how it ends.’

‘We are a part of this just as much as you are,’ Louisa said. ‘You cannot deny us this now.’

‘And remember,’ Caroline said, ‘my sister and I know things you had rather we did not.’

‘Gentlemen, I think we are being blackmailed,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘We cannot —’ Mr Darcy exclaimed.

‘I will not —’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

‘I do not think we have a choice,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘And frankly speaking, they do have a point. Shall we then?’

The gentlemen climbed into the carriage in which the ladies were already sitting, Colonel Fitzwilliam gave directions to the driver and they were off.

‘Where are we going?’ Louisa asked.

‘Some place called Oakham Mount,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘That is were the delivery is taking place – or rather, has already taken place.’

‘Has already taken place?’ Mr Hurst asked.

‘The spy has already deposited his papers there earlier today,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam explained. ‘I was too late to catch him there, but I took the liberty of replacing them with some fabricated papers of my own making.’

Mr Hurst nodded in acknowledgement.

‘The papers were then picked up by some agents of the French,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam continued. ‘As
per orders of Lord Hawkesbury, we did not apprehend them, only observed. They deposited the shipment on Oakham Mount, where the spy will pick it up in about -'

He consulted his pocket watch.

' - thirty minutes, or thereabouts.'

Louisa frowned.

'Why did you not apprehend the French agents?' she asked.

'Elementary, my dear,' Mr Hurst said. 'Now that we have intercepted the exchanges, we can send them false information – that is worth more than simply catching some minions.'

'I see,' Caroline said. 'So nobody was apprehended at all?'

'Oh, there was one apprehension,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said, 'but it will not appear as such.'

'Did he -?' Mr Hurst asked.

'He saw fit to remove himself from the investigations,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said. 'It was decided that it would be treated as an accident.'

'Who?' Caroline asked. 'Was it -'

'The person whose possible involvement I mentioned to you, yes,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

'Oh,' Caroline said. 'And he -'

'Shot himself,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said curtly. 'A terrible accident.'

Mr Hurst said nothing, but Louisa saw him grimace.

'Who?' Darcy asked.

'Later,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said. 'We will be there any minute.'

'Oh, this is all so very exciting, is it not?' Caroline asked.

'Horribly exciting,' Mr Darcy said. 'Would you mind not stepping on my foot?'

'I do apologise,' Caroline said. 'It is rather crowded in here, is it not?'

'Yes,' Mr Darcy said stiffly. 'Now, Fitzwilliam, would you care to explain who has stolen my identity?'

'Actually,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said, 'I think it will be more interesting for everyone if I keep this surprise to myself a little longer.'

'Colonel, I do not quite think -' Mr Hurst began.

'With all due respect, Colonel,' Colonel Fitzwilliam said. 'I think it is better if you see this for yourself.'

The carriage stopped at the foot of Oakham Mount and Colonel Fitzwilliam made them exit. He signalled to the driver to drive on and began marching upwards. The gentlemen followed him easily;
the ladies had slightly more trouble in their thin slippers.

‘I should have brought something more substantial than this shawl,’ Caroline whispered.

‘Do not worry, if we continue at this pace, you will be warm soon enough,’ Louisa answered.

‘Will you be quiet!’ Mr Hurst hissed.

Soon, they had reached a flatter part of the way and Colonel Fitzwilliam made him stop.

‘The hollow trunk of this oak is where the shipment will be picked up,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam explained. ‘I suggest that you two ladies hide in that shrubbery over there, whilst we will wait behind these oaks.’

Grumbling, Caroline and Louisa made their way to the other side of the path.

‘And no talking!’ Mr Hurst admonished them.

They did not have to wait long. With much wheezing and panting someone soon made his way up the path and stopped in front of the hollow oak. He looked around to see whether he was alone, then stuck his arm inside the oak and pulled out a small parcel.

‘While I am sure the brie in that particular parcel is excessively delicious,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, leaning nonchalantly against the trunk of the tree behind which he had been hiding and calmly pointing his gun at the stranger, ‘I would welcome it if you let go and be so kind as to raise your hands.’

He was pointing his gun straight at the stranger’s back. The stranger turned around and, upon seeing the gun pointed at him, gave a little squeak and dropped the parcel.

‘Ne m’abbatsez pas, s’il vous plaît!’ he cried. ‘Je vais vous dire tous!’

‘I had rather hoped you would,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

‘You’re English!’ the stranger squeaked.

‘Of course I am,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘And so, it would seem, are you.’

The first rays of the sun came out from behind a cloud and Caroline and Louisa could see the stranger’s face.

‘Mr Collins!’ Caroline exclaimed.

‘The fat clergyman!’ Louisa said. ‘Why, I would never -’

‘What was that?’ the stranger squeaked.

‘Nothing,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam groaned. ‘You can come out now, ladies. I think all danger has passed.’

Caroline and Louisa stepped onto the path as Mr Hurst did the same.

‘For heaven’s sake, drop that gun, Louisa!’ Mr Hurst said. ‘You will hurt somebody!’

‘Yes,’ Louisa said meekly and handed the gun to Caroline, who was about to give it to Mr Hurst when she noticed something.
‘It is not loaded, Louisa!’ she said.

‘It is not?’

‘Ladies –’ Mr Hurst said.

In that moment, Mr Darcy stepped out from behind his shrubbery. Mr Collins, upon seeing Mr Darcy, gave another squeak and genuflected.

‘Mr Darcy,’ he whimpered. ‘Mr Darcy, I had no idea – Lady Catherine never – if I had known you were French –’

‘What on earth is he talking about?’ Mr Darcy asked, frowning.

‘I have no idea,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘Lady Catherine –’ Mr Collins panted again.

‘So, it was my aunt who persuaded you to spy for the French?’ Colonel Fitzwilliam asked pleasantly.

‘The French? No, no, this is a mistake!’ Mr Collins exclaimed. ‘I am an English spy!’

He puffed out his chest as far as it was possible for a man in his circumstances.

‘My dear Mr Collins,’ Mr Hurst said, ‘we are the English spies. You have been spying for the French, I am afraid.’

‘No, no, I never – introduced by Lady Catherine herself – no question –’

‘I hear you mention Lady Catherine time and again,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Was it she who set you up to spy for the French?’

‘Of course not!’ Mr Collins squeaked. ‘My noble patroness would never – that is, I was not spying for the French, I tell you. I have been spying for England.’

‘Then explain, please,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘how the information you gathered, Mr Collins – using my cousin Mr Darcy’s name, by the way, which was rather bad style – ended up with the French.’

‘But – he said they were English!’ Mr Collins said. ‘Their English was so good – they had no accents.’

‘Indeed,’ Mr Hurst said sharply. ‘Who said that?’

‘Why, Sir Horace, of course!’ Mr Collins said with not a little pride. ‘The head of the British Secret Service – an eminently important person. I was introduced to him by Lady Catherine herself – a very valiant member of the community – asked me for a little favour –’

‘And that favour was, to gather information by pretending to be my cousin?’ Colonel Fitzwilliam asked.

‘Only – only to confuse the French!’ Mr Collins said. ‘It was not meant in any disrespect to you, Mr Darcy, sir –’

He bowed again in Mr Darcy’s direction.
‘Sir Horace said you knew all about it – I meant to tell you this night at the ball how distinguished I felt to be allowed to use your identity – such an honour.’

‘And all the information you needed to pretend to be him, you gathered from Lady Catherine,’ Caroline suddenly said.

She thought she understood the case now.

‘Y-yes,’ Mr Collins said. ‘Lady Catherine takes delight in talking about her most esteemed relatives – the connection between Rosings and Pemberley.’

‘You?’ Mr Darcy suddenly roared and, making one step towards Mr Collins, he grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up. ‘You have been stealing my identity, you hapless little miscreant – worm – odious, vile.’

‘Please, cousin,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘Let him live.’

‘But he stole my identity!’ Mr Darcy cried. ‘Disgusting, despicable.’

‘Yes, yes, we know,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘He will not do so again.’

‘He will not?’ Caroline interjected.

‘He knows that if he comes within a hundred yards of information that is not meant for him, we will know,’ Mr Hurst said. ‘It is my guess that we shoot rather better than him – and faster.’

‘Yes, sir, yes, sir,’ Mr Collins panted, still breathless from Mr Darcy’s firm grip. ‘Everything you ask, sir.’

‘Let him go, Darcy,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

‘Get out of my eyes,’ Mr Darcy snarled, dropping Mr Collins. ‘Get away from me.’

‘Not one word about this to anyone, do you understand?’ Mr Hurst said. ‘Not a single word.’

‘Yes, sir, yes, of course,’ Mr Collins said. ‘But – Sir Horace.’

‘You do not need to trouble yourself about Sir Horace,’ Mr Hurst said.

‘What – what do I do now?’ Mr Collins asked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

‘Whatever you like,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘Get married, plant a garden, have bees – whatever you like, provided you do not spy anymore.’

‘No, sir, never, sir, not ever,’ Mr Collins wheezed and, bowing and curtsying, tottered back down the path.

‘Well, then,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, picking up the parcel Mr Collins had dropped. ‘So much for that. Anybody care for some French wine? I believe the one in this packet is rather good.’

‘That is all?’ Caroline asked. ‘That is it?’

‘Yes, that is all,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘Do you believe I would have taken you along had I not known it would end like this?’

‘You knew?’ Mr Darcy asked. ‘You knew it was him?’
‘Only since this morning,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘I definitely did not have him on my list of possible culprits. Shall we go back? I believe there is a carriage waiting for us at the foot of the mount.’

‘Yes, let us go,’ Caroline said. ‘I cannot believe this is it.’

‘Why did we have to trudge up the hill for this?’ Louisa complained. ‘You could have told us at Netherfield.’

‘If I recall correctly,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘it was you who wanted to come along. As for me, I needed to hear his confession in person, with witnesses present, to close my case.’

‘The case is closed then?’ Mr Darcy asked. ‘There is no one else around trying to steal my identity, trying to discredit me so he can marry my aunt and inherit her fortune?’

‘None of whom we know,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘This group will continue for a little while longer perhaps, until they realise they are not getting any good information any more. Since, however, the man who insisted on setting you up is no longer involved, I believe there is no more danger for you.’

‘Good,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘You see,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam explained, ‘what I could not understand all the time, was why someone would want to pretend to be my cousin in the first place. It is true, Darcy knows some people and has good connections, but there are many people who are much better connected, whose identity would be worth much more – no offense, Darcy.’

‘None taken,’ Mr Darcy said.

‘However, if someone had a personal motive to get Darcy out of the way on top of getting their information -’

‘Of course,’ Mr Hurst said and inhaled sharply. ‘I cannot believe I did not see that earlier.’

‘Well, I suppose it made sense for Sir Horace,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘but for anyone else -’

‘It does sound rather ridiculous,’ Louisa said. ‘Are you quite sure this is it?’

‘I promise, it is,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘And if I recall correctly, Miss Bingley, there was something we meant to discuss, was there not?’

He offered his arm to Caroline and they began walking down the path. Mr Darcy, still cursing, followed them.
'A wonderful morning, is it not?' Caroline said and beamed at the Colonel. 'If a bit chilly, perhaps.'

She shivered slightly.

'My dear, you should have said something,' the Colonel said and shrugged off his great-coat. With great tenderness, he helped Caroline into it and waited for her to button it before he took her arm again.

'My, I feel quite dashing,' Caroline said. 'So many capes -'

'I cannot help it,' the Colonel said. 'I am a man of fashion.'

Caroline laughed.

'I am glad you are here,' she said.

'As am I, my dear, as am I,' the Colonel replied and patted her arm.

'How is London?' Caroline asked.

'Boring without you,' the Colonel said. 'It has quite lost its splendor.'

Caroline laughed again.

'And how is your sister?' she said.

'As usual,' the Colonel said. 'Nagging everybody around her – she thanks you for your letters, by the way, which she said were most illuminating.'

Caroline looked down in slight embarrassment.

'Confess it, you were worried about me, were you not?' the Colonel said.

'Well, Darcy said they had guns!' Caroline exclaimed. 'I only did not want to have to identify your corpse, you know.'

'And neither would I have liked having to identify yours,' the Colonel said.

'Such a dreadful business, corpses,' Caroline agreed.

'Indeed,' the Colonel said. 'Incidentally, speaking of dreadful businesses – I recall there was some unfinished business between us, was there not?'

'Well, Louisa,' Christian said and put an arm around his wife’s shoulders. 'This is it then. Give it another twenty-four hours and you will be rid of me.'

'Really?' Louisa said, looking up at her husband and blinking in the early morning’s sun.

'You sound disappointed, my dear,' Christian said.

'Well, I had gotten used to being married to you,' Louisa said. 'It will be difficult to suddenly not be married to you.'
Christian laughed.

‘Now, now, come, Louisa,’ he said. ‘We were never truly married, now were we?’

‘Yes, but -’ Louisa said. ‘I shall miss you all the same. And Matthew. I do not suppose I can see you again once you are gone?’

‘Not for a while, I suppose,’ Christian said. ‘In a couple of years, probably, nobody will recall what Hurst looked like, especially if I grow a beard – there can be no harm in us seeing each other once I have returned to this country.’

‘You do not plan to stay in England, then?’ Louisa asked.

‘No, I do not think so,’ Christian said. ‘We will probably go to Ireland for a while, until London has all but forgotten the hapless Mr Hurst.’

Louisa did not say anything.

‘What is it, Lou?’ Christian said softly.

‘I do not want to say goodbye,’ Louisa said. ‘You are my friends, both of you.’

Christian was obviously slightly taken aback.

‘Why, thank you, Louisa,’ he said. ‘I consider you a friend as well – a true friend even, which is much rarer.’

Louisa gave a weak smile.

‘Still,’ Christian continued. ‘You know that today must mean goodbye. For your reputation’s sake, Louisa – for the security of all of us – it would be too suspicious if just after your husband’s tragic death, you were seen with someone who so closely resembles your deceased husband in all but name and behaviour. In a few years, people will have forgotten about me, but these days they know me as the idiot Hurst.’

‘But -’

‘Of course,’ Christian said. ‘Fitzwilliam knows who I am now and unless I am much mistaken, that means your sister will know it as well -’

‘I already told her while you were getting the guns,’ Louisa said sheepishly. ‘I hope you do not mind, but I had to tell her! I said nothing about Matthew of course.’

‘That is quite alright then,’ Christian said and laughed. ‘I never wanted to estrange you from your sister, Louisa, truly.’

‘I am so glad to have her back,’ Louisa said.

‘You two will probably have a lot to talk about,’ Christian said.

‘Oh, yes,’ Louisa said. ‘I must explain my behaviour to her and I want to know what she did the last months. And I want to tell her -’

‘Tell her,’ Christian said. ‘Tell her everything, she has a right to know. Only -’

‘Do not worry,’ Louisa said. ‘I will keep your secret. Always.’
‘You are one in a million, Lou,’ Christian said.

He kissed her hair.

‘I love you, Louisa, I really do.’

Louisa said nothing, but allowed her husband to help her into the carriage. Nobody spoke during their short drive; Mr Darcy was still scowling and Caroline, who had seated herself next to Louisa, seemed somehow flustered and too embarrassed to talk, much like Colonel Fitzwilliam. In silence, they rumbled back to Netherfield, where they were informed that Charles had left for London just minutes previously.

‘There are still some questions I would like you to answer,’ Mr Darcy said to the two Colonels.

‘Yes, please,’ Caroline agreed. ‘I do not think I have yet understood everything full well.’

‘In due course,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘In the meantime, I have here with me what I presume is French cheese of a particular quality – it would be a shame to let it rot.’

‘Shall we have breakfast?’ Louisa suggested. ‘We could discuss everything over a nice full table of breakfast.’

‘Please,’ her husband said. ‘I am starving.’

Caroline frowned.

‘I assure you,’ Christian said and laughed. ‘This time it is not a part of my persona. I am really hungry.’

‘Well, then,’ Caroline said. ‘Let me see what we can serve you, Mr Hurst, in addition to whatever cheeses we are to sample.’

‘If you will excuse me for a moment,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I am going to change.’

‘Actually, that sounds like a good idea,’ Christian said. ‘I will do the same.’

A little while later, washed, brushed and in morning dress, they reassembled around the breakfast table where Caroline was pouring coffee for everyone. A footman came and brought a couple of letters for Mr Hurst and Mr Darcy as well as the London papers from the previous day. Caroline gave a signal to the footman to retreat again and Louisa noticed Caroline had already sent the other servants away.

‘I am sorry, sir,’ Caroline said when she handed a cup to Christian, ‘I am not quite sure how I am supposed to address you. Is it Colonel, or -’

‘You will find,’ Christian said and took the cup, ‘that I answer to Christian.’

‘Oh,’ Caroline said, surprised. ‘Well, then, Christian. Call me Caroline.’

Colonel Fitzwilliam seated himself next to Caroline.

‘May I have a cup of coffee as well?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘Of course,’ Caroline said. ‘What about you, Colonel? Coffee?’

‘Yes, thank you, Caroline,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said and took the cup she offered.
‘Do you mind if I -’ Christian said and gesticulated towards his letters. ‘Only this looks sort of important.’

‘Please, do go ahead,’ Caroline said. ‘Is there anything of interest in the newspapers, Mr Darcy?’

‘Not really,’ Mr Darcy said and frowned, turning a page. ‘Oh, this is surprising – the Earl of Gloucester died.’

‘The man was born in the reign of Queen Anne,’ Christian said genially. ‘No offense to the old gentleman, I quite liked him, but the only surprise to me is that he was still alive.’

He folded up his letter and put it in his pocket.

‘Yes, but still,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘I met him at Lady Grace’s just a couple of weeks ago. Such a personage – oh, well.’

‘I suppose there is nothing in there about Sir Horace?’ Colonel Fitzwilliam asked.

‘There would not be in either case,’ Mr Darcy said. ‘It is yesterday’s paper.’

‘Of course,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘Not that I think that much more than his obituary will make it.’

‘Well, he was in a rather elevated position,’ Christian added. ‘His death, accidental though it will appear, is going to cause some interest.’

‘Why did he do it though?’ Louisa asked. ‘That is what I do not understand.’

‘Saw no way out, I suppose,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘and had no intention to be beheaded on Tower Hill.’

‘Fitzwilliam,’ Mr Darcy said pointedly. ‘There are ladies present.’

Caroline rolled her eyes.

‘Do they still behead traitors on Tower Hill, Colonel?’ she asked eagerly.

‘The last one was Lord Lovat, I suppose,’ Christian said. ‘And that was quite some time ago. But I suppose Louisa meant rather, why did Sir Horace decide to become a traitor in the first place?’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Louisa said.

‘The reason is as old as mankind,’ Christian said. ‘Or very nearly so: money.’

‘Lived above his circumstances for years,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam explained. ‘Always liked to ingratiate himself with those who he thought counted and imitated them. He had to get into difficulties at one point.’

‘I suppose he had been approached by foreign agents quite some time ago,’ Christian said. ‘They seem to have offered rather a lot of money, but at first, he refused.’

‘Why?’ Louisa asked. ‘If he was in financial trouble, surely that must have seemed like the perfect solution?’

‘Well, he claimed it was because his conscience forbade him to do so,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘But in view of the fact that his conscience was perfectly agreeable with the situation when more
money was offered, I suppose it was rather that the incentive had not been high enough.’

‘Or, that he had not yet found a way to see the whole thing through without incriminating himself,’ Christian added.

‘In either case, when he first refused them, he also had plans to marry our aunt,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam explained. ‘Lady Catherine de Bourgh. It just so happened that his estate in Kent was bordering hers and he had an idea of uniting the two.’

‘But Anne -’ Mr Darcy interjected. ‘He must have known that Anne was to inherit – that Lady Catherine could not will it to him -’

‘Oh, he knew that,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘But for some reason, as people usually do, he underestimated Anne. He knew that she is sickly and rather withdrawn and – or so he said – came to the conclusion that she would not be a danger to his plans. Unless -

‘Unless Anne married Darcy here,’ Christian said bluntly. ‘And Lady Catherine was not exactly shy about announcing that.’

‘Yes, but Anne and I -’ Mr Darcy began, but he was cut short.

‘Why Lady Catherine?’ Caroline asked. ‘Could he not simply have courted Anne?’

‘I have no idea,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam answered. ‘It may be as simple as that he genuinely loved my aunt. Love will occur in the oddest places, you know, my dear.’

Caroline blushed.

‘For whatever reason it was,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam continued. ‘He was determined to marry our aunt and somehow saw his success as depending on getting Darcy out of the way. Not particularly successful, I should add.’

Mr Darcy scowled. ‘What did he do?’ he asked.

‘From what he told us,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘he tried to discredit you through rumours which he hoped would one day reach Lady Catherine’s ears.’

‘He spread rumours about me?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘He tried to,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘but as I said, he was not very successful and he gave up soon again and continued to bide his time until he could come up with a better plan, all the while incurring more and more debts, I should add.’

‘How did he change his mind about the French agents’ offer?’ Louisa asked.

‘Ah,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘Fate was kind to him that day. Just when Sir Horace thought all was lost, fate sent him Mr Collins and Sir Horace saw his chance. He realised early on that Mr Collins would be ideal to do his dirty business. He was perfectly obsequious and completely in awe with Sir Horace’s title. It helped, of course, that Sir Horace was introduced to him by our aunt, whom Mr Collins seems to hold in complete reverence.’

‘I always thought clergymen were forbidden to make idols,’ Christian murmured.

Louisa hushed him.

‘And then,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam continued, ‘in a stroke of genius, Sir Horace realised that he could
get rid of both his problems at once if only he somehow managed to blame his actions on my cousin and he decided to put you on the case, Colonel.’

‘I had been wondering about that,’ Christian said. ‘He seemed determined very early on that the culprit could be none other than Darcy, even when the evidence was still very circumstantial. Of course he would be.’

‘Indeed,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘As he saw it, once this business was over, he himself would be rich again and my cousin either disgraced and executed or exiled to the continent, freeing Sir Horace’s way with Lady Catherine and her estate.’

‘Why did Collins do it?’ Mr Darcy asked.

‘I can only guess,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam answered. ‘Partly the thrill of it all, I suppose. Then, of course, he received smuggled goods as tokens of gratitude – and I have to say the brie is excellent – which for a glutton like him is no small thing. Mainly, I think, it was because he liked the idea of being of service to one whom he perceived as one of the most distinguished persons in the realm. He had high hopes, I suppose, of being recommended for his deeds and maybe even offered more glamorous positions.’

‘And why did he follow me here?’ Mr Darcy asked. ‘How?’

‘Again, Sir Horace was lucky,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘When he found out that you had decided to follow Bingley to Hertfordshire, he was afraid he would have to give up his plan. But then, he found out that, most coincidentally, you had decided to remove to the very part of Hertfordshire where his lackey Collins had family – even better, where Collins had hopes to inherit some estate or other. He mentioned the matter of the inheritance to Lady Catherine one day and she, always eager to advise people, urged Mr Collins to visit his family as soon as possible.’

‘How did Sir Horace want to end it?’ Mr Darcy asked. ‘Surely he could not let it go on forever.’

‘Oh, he had plans for that as well,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘He hoped that you would be cornered by the Colonel here, who, as a gentleman, would then offer you the honourable way out. He was sure that you would do it, for Georgiana’s sake, in order to avoid a scandal.’

‘Most ironically then,’ Christian said, ‘that in the end, it was him’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said.

‘Was it – did he really?’ Caroline whispered.

‘I do not want to talk about it,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said. ‘It was not pleasant. When Lord Hawkesbury and I confronted him – well, he took to begging rather like Mr Collins – then locked himself in his library.’

Under the table, Caroline reached for his hand and pressed it.

‘I am riding into town today,’ Mr Darcy announced suddenly, ‘and then on North. I shall return with Georgiana and my aunt for Christmas. Do you care to join me, Fitzwilliam?’

‘Much as I would like to see the mater and Georgiana,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘I am afraid that I do not have the time. I shall accompany you, however, as far as London, for I need to be there by tomorrow.’

Louisa could see that Caroline seemed disappointed.
Perhaps you should go with them, Caroline,’ she said. ‘Did you not say you longed to see your friends in town?’

‘That is true,’ Caroline said, ‘and there is nothing, really, that keeps me here. But what about you, Louisa, and – Christian?’

Louisa looked at her husband.

‘I think we will come with you,’ Christian said. ‘Unless you would rather stay here, Louisa?’

‘No, let us go back,’ Louisa said. ‘I think we all wish to see our friends in town again.’

‘Do you need to take leave of anybody?’ Colonel Fitzwilliam asked.

‘No, I do not think so,’ Louisa said.

‘We should perhaps write a letter to Jane Bennet,’ Caroline amended. ‘She is a very nice girl and I would not want her to feel obliged to wait for Charles’ return.’

‘No,’ Louisa agreed. ‘I suppose it would be best for both of them if we ended it now. We should have a word with Charles when we are in town.’

‘That seems a bit cruel,’ Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ‘to just separate them like that.’

‘Trust me, it is for the best,’ Caroline said. ‘If we allowed this to continue, they would only be heartbroken ultimately. Their backgrounds are too different.’

‘Yes, but -’

‘And besides,’ Mr Darcy said, ‘I have observed Miss Bennet and I could not detect any sign of affection within her. Her friends would be delighted, of course, were he to offer for her and will be distraught at the loss of him, but I do not think she would suffer very much.’

‘Well, if you think so -’

‘She will probably be relieved, rather,’ Louisa added, ‘not to have been obliged to enter into a loveless match.’

‘Some people seem to do well with marriages of convenience,’ Christian said. ‘Would you not agree, dearest wife?’

‘Yes, but I do not think Jane Bingley is that type,’ Louisa said.

‘No, not at all,’ Caroline said. ‘I do not think she could ever be truly happy with a husband she did not love – she would adjust to it as best as she could, but she would never be happy.’

‘So you see,’ Louisa said, ‘it may sound cruel, but in the end, it will be better for both of them.’

‘Charles will forget her soon enough,’ Caroline said. ‘He always does, with all the girls.’

Louisa only had the chance to speak to her husband when they were back in their room later and seeing to the packing of their belongings. Louisa sent her maid away to search for a pair of slippers and she and Christian were alone in the room.

‘Why did you say we would go to town?’ she asked him. ‘I thought you meant to arrange for your,
eh, demise here.’

‘I did,’ Christian said. ‘And I still could, if you wished.’

‘But -’

‘I would much prefer, however, to remain Mr Hurst for a little while longer if you do not mind,’ Christian added.

‘I thought you hated Mr Hurst,’ Louisa said.

‘I do,’ Christian said. ‘Passionately, as a matter of fact.’

‘Then why -’

Christian took a letter out of his pocket.

‘This is the letter I received over breakfast,’ he said.

‘What is it?’ Louisa asked.

‘Apparently,’ Christian said, ‘there is a baronet in Somerset whose finances are very irregular.’

‘So?’

‘Well, you know the drill,’ Christian said. ‘I find their weak point, then I sniff them out. Luckily, Sir Walter would do a great deal for a noble son, and it just so happens we will be travelling with our good friend, the Hon. Mr Aldridge – if you agree to come with me, that is.’

‘What do you need me for if Matthew is the bait?’ Louisa enquired.

‘You would be responsible for the daughters,’ Christian said, ‘he has three or four of them, that should keep you busy. And besides -’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, apparently Sir Walter loves good-looking men,’ Christian said. ‘I need you to protect my honour.’

‘Dear me,’ Louisa said and frowned. ‘Please try to behave yourself. I do not want to have to call him out.’

Christian laughed and kissed her on the cheek.

‘We need to pack,’ Louisa said.

‘We already are packing, Lou,’ Christian pointed out.

‘Have you written to Matthew yet to let him know when we will meet him?’ Louisa asked.

‘There is no need to,’ Christian said. ‘We will be in London shortly.’

‘If you say so,’ Louisa said. ‘I only thought it would be best not to delay. Have you seen my gun?’

‘Have I told you recently how much I love you?’ Christian said. ‘Honestly, I do. You are the best wife I will ever have.’
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