To Guard and Be Guarded

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Summary

This is the tale of Elise Bennet, the daughter of a wealthy businessman, who employs Fitzwilliam Darcy as a bodyguard for her. Darcy assumes her to be superficial and stupid, and she is repelled by his haughty demeanour. Will his role as her bodyguard enable them to let their guards down and let each other in?
Chapter 1

Elise pulled her suitcase towards the exit, dodging hugging couples and runaway luggage trolleys. She finally navigated her way out the terminal and was immediately struck by the blinding Los Angeles sun.

"Well I'm certainly not in England anymore," she smirked to herself, remembering gloomy skies and the drizzle as she’d entered Heathrow Terminal 4 more than 12 hours ago.

"Little Miss Bennet," a familiar voice stated from just behind her. She swivelled around to face it. "Good grief girl! What happened to your tan?"

"HILL!" squealed Elise as she looked into the grinning familiar face of her family's long-standing chauffeur. She immediately launched into their secret handshake — a fist bump, followed by an elbow bump, followed by a shoulder bump and concluded with a high-five.

"Did you miss me while you were on the other side of the pond, little girl?" Hill asked.

"No Hill. Have you forgotten? I've been your arch nemesis ever since you hid my strawberry lipstick when I was 5 and told me a butterfly flew away with it."

"It was in your best interests! You didn't seem to be able to distinguish your lips from the rest of your face! Your whole chin was pink too!" he exclaimed. They both laughed at the memory as Hill reached for her Elise's worn out suitcase. It was covered in iron-on patches she'd collected from all the places she'd ever been to and then some.

"This is all you've got?" Hill asked. "I came to get Princess Alyssa when she came back from a 10 day trip to Florida and she had three of those Louis designer bags, and you, you go to a different continent for an entire year and this is all you come back with."

Elise smirked at the thought of her youngest stepsister and her antics. It wouldn't be too long until she was experiencing them first hand. She took a deep breath in a futile effort to clear her mind before exposing herself to the chaos that would be her family home.

Elise stepped on to the gravel driveway and turned towards the boot of the limo.

"Oh, no you don't!" Hill said as he gestured at for her to turn around. "I'll take this upstairs for you."

She rolled her eyes, knowing he would not be persuaded otherwise. She climbed the stairs and entered the house she'd been away from for the last year. She inhaled the flower potpourri smell in the hallway and decided to forgo taking the lift upstairs in favour of looking at all the family photographs going up the staircase.

She rolled her eyes as she noticed a new one of her three stepsisters, Marissa, Carissa and Alyssa, complete with Alyssa's Chihuahua, Baby Boy. Elise had never been a dog fan, always having feared them, but Baby Boy in particular gave her the creeps. He had this look in his eyes that made her think he secretly wanted to kill everyone in their sleep. In the new photo, Marissa sat on the ground between two deckchairs with her knees drawn to her chest and a pained expression on her face while the other two teenage girls were each occupying a deck chair by the pool dressed in bikinis and stilettos with faces caked in make up.

Her eyes scanned several photos of each of the girls and her stepmother and father. They finally
rested on a photo of an extremely chubby version of herself sat sitting atop her fathers lap and holding onto the hand of her older sister Jenine. She, at age 3, looked all that was poised and elegant, sitting between her mother and father on the sofa. Elise sighed as she realised the short period in which their family of four had been happy before the illusion was shattered.

As she approached the top of the staircase, she heard the tell tale signs that her stepsisters were home in the forming screeching, stomping and swearing. She stepped onto the landing, only to be barged into with a pair of sharp elbows.

"Elise! You're back! Did you scope out any hot English boys for me? I'm like seriously in love with Tom Hiddleston right now… I mean, have you seen the tushy on that man?" Alyssa rambled.

"Yes, Aly, England was fine, and I had a really comfortable flight, thank you for asking. But yeah, I have seen the tushy on Hiddles and I do see where you're coming from." Elise smiled at her stepsister. Alyssa and Elise rarely saw eye on anything. They fought a lot and there were times when Elise wanted to chew her arm off just so she could throw it at the younger girl. But when it came down to it, they were a part of the same dysfunctional family and Elise was somewhat fond of her stepsister. To an extent.

"You bitch! That was MY sweater and how could you get tomato sauce on it! You didn't even ask if you could borrow it and jeez you have the same one in blue anyway!" The shouting was followed by a series of stomps as Carissa, older by a year to Alyssa, though just as immature, entered the hallway and tried to lunge at her sister.

"Oh, hey, Els…" she acknowledged as she turned her head to see the new arrival. Alyssa took this time to disappear and Carissa turned away from Elise to resume her chase.

"So in case you were worried, nothing's changed while you've been away," came the sardonic voice of Elise's third stepsister, Marissa, accompanied by her signature smirk.

Marissa was in many ways the odd one out. Where Alyssa and Carissa were short and petite with dishwater blond hair, Marissa was taller and broader than her sisters with darker hair. She was always proclaiming that when she stood next to them they made her look like a transvestite. Where the other two were frivolous and silly, Marissa was serious and sarcastic. While the other two were too young to remember their own father when he had died, Marissa could and she had never forgiven their mother for remarrying to Elise's father.

"Mars," Elise smiled, giving her a hug, "you've been awful at keeping in touch. Even Aly's been better. I've only managed to keep up to date on your life by reading the tabloids. Apparently you three have been giving the Kardashians a run for their money."

"Yeah, and Mom's been giving Bruce Jenner a run for his money. Don't be surprised if she doesn't look happy to see you back, her face is permanently this," she said as she pulled Francissa Bennet's signature duckface, which Elise couldn't help but snigger at.

"Where is Fran, anyway?" Elise asked.

"Out back with her personal trainer. Your dad is at work, as usual. Apparently he's had a back room added onto his office with a bed and stuff. He now stays the night there whenever Mom isn't dragging him to a function. You never know though, maybe he'll make an appearance now that you and Jen are home.

"Oh apparently Jen gets in from China at about 4 this afternoon. Ugh, I wish I could spend a year at an orphanage in China. To be honest I don't even care if it's not in China. Or not an orphanage. I just
need to get out of this house!" She exclaimed, flustered. "Oh well, 13 days 'til I graduate!" she said with false cheer. "And I only applied to Switzerland, Sweden and Japan."

Elise gave her a sympathetic hug before being abruptly pushed away because Marissa was not a fan of physical contact or expressions of emotion.

"Oops, sorry! Ok, I'm going to go wash out the plane smell from me and take a long-ass nap until Jen gets in." Elise turned to head towards her old room.

"You do that." Marissa called over her shoulder. "Also you should probably make the most of that nap because Mom's dragging us out to some charity function hosted at the Lucas's."
Chapter 2

Elise was sitting in front of the mirror at her vanity, attempting to put on mascara with her mouth closed to defy the norm. She was dressed in a pale blue off-the-shoulders gown. The fabric criss-crossed over her chest and was embellished with glittering stones. The dress was gathered at the waist in small pleats and hung loosely over her lower body. She wore no necklace but she did have a sapphire bracelet around her left wrist, the blue of the substantial sized gem contrasting with her pale skin. Elise had wanted to put her hair up but Jen had seen how long it had grown and had demanded that her sister wear it down. Her soft chestnut ringlets cascaded down her back, and were kept off her shoulders by two braids on either side of her head. They were used to pull hair off her face and secured at the back of her head.

Elise had been exhausted from her long journey, and as promised to Marissa, after a quick shower she had climbed into bed for a long-ass nap. She must have been asleep for at least a couple of hours when she had felt another body clambering over her and engulfing her in a tight hug. She had jolted awake to find her sister Jenine's smiling face beside her cheek and had found her sister's eyes glistening with tears.

Jen had always been a softie. Elise and she, with only a 2 year age gap, had always been each other's main support. After their parents' divorce, Elise and Jenine had lived with their mother. She was a down to earth woman who was struggling to get her writing published, a dream that their father had infringed upon during their parents' 5 year marriage. During that time, the two girls had been playmates as two sisters so close in age would be expected to be. When at last their mother's writing had become popular enough for her to fully pursue her dream of being a travel writer and spending long periods of time abroad, the two girls, aged 13 and 15, had moved in with their father, an aloof workaholic.

In an attempt to give the girls the family he thought they needed, he had married Fran and brought in her three, much younger, daughters to the family. This had proved to be a rash decision, as David Bennet soon discovered that Fran was perhaps even less suited to him than his ex-wife. During this time, Elise and Jen had grown to become best friends and relied on each other as 3 unfamiliar girls and their boisterous mother barged into their lives while their own father retreated from them.

Jen had initially lived at home while she was in university, although once Elise graduated, the two had lived together while they girls finished their degrees. Jen then went on to train to become a teacher. After graduating, Elise had decided to pursue a research opportunity in London before going to medical school. With her sister gone, Jen no longer felt a pull keeping her grounded close to home and had decided to take a 6 month placement in China. The past year had been the longest time since Elise's birth that the two sisters had spent apart.

Jen had climbed into Elise's bed and the two talked for hours until their reunion was interrupted by shouts from their stepmother, Fran. She declared that it was time to get ready and that 'no one should be able to say that Fran makes stunning clothes but her girls never dress that nice'. Elise had laughed at her stepmother's latest career path. The woman had delved into fashion design, selling clothes, publishing her autobiography and numerous other endeavours. However, she seemed to be best suited to managing the lives of her youngest daughters and turning them into infamous socialites.

Normally El would have delayed getting ready until the very last moment, however, it had been a year since she'd seen her best friend, Carla Lucas, and she was for once looking forward to a function.
Elise, the other 4 girls and their mother climbed out of the limo as elegantly as they could and walked up the driveway into the massive foyer of the Lucas house. Apparently David Bennet would be meeting them there when he arrived from work.

The girls all looked stunning. Jen, like Elise, was wearing a long gown. It was a faint peach coloured toga-style dress, which contrasted nicely with Jen's now tanned skin and flaxen hair. Marissa's dress was black lace and ended just below her knees. Her make-up was dark and she was, of course, smirking. Cari had on a red dress with a sweet heart neckline and Aly had on a red bodycon dress that left little to the imagination. Elise rolled her eyes, unsurprised that her stepmother would allow her 16 year old daughter to leave the house so scantily clad.

"Wooaah!" Elise exclaimed as she felt a pair of fingers zap her sides. Turning around she found herself face-to-face with Carla Lucas. Although Carla was actually older than both Elise and Jen, she and Elise had always been extremely close, both sharing the same sarcastic humour.

Carla was the eldest daughter in the Lucas family. She had been adopted by Bud and Angelica Lucas at age 7 from an orphanage in Peru. Since then their family had grown to include 6 other children of varying ages. Elise had always been closest to Carla and Jun Wei. J.W. was around the same age as Elise and had been adopted from China. Elise was much more outgoing than him and so, although they had been classmates, they largely ran in different circles. They did have a significant amount in common, and although they didn't spend much time together in school, they often wound up doing science projects side by side. They also chatted at functions outside of school because of their mutual 'geekery' and the friendship between their families. The other Lucas child that had a close friendship with one of the Bennets was Mihika. Adopted from India, she was a close friend of Alyssa's. While Elise and 'Mickey', as she called herself, had never been close friends, they did know each other very well.

It was always startling to note the differences in the appearances of the Lucas children. Angelica Lucas, like Fran, was a busybody. She seemed to view her children as a variety of dolls for her to dress up and was constantly trying to enforce on them the personalities she wished for them to have. It was only the older two children who had largely managed to break away from their adopted mother's plans.

Carla had bronze skin and dark hair and, while generally considered plain with her crooked nose and teeth, frizzy hair and thick spectacles, she had a beautiful smile. Her grin was wide and she was fortunate to possess the deepest dimples ever encountered. Carla was fairly broad and buxom. Her affinity for pant suits in attempt to hide herself drove her mother insane.

Where Carla was broad and curvaceous, Mickey was spindly and angular. She had an extremely small frame and, at the age of 16, was easily able to pass off as 12. She had long, raven-coloured, wavy hair that she adamantly refused to ever braid claiming she would 'NOT be labelled as the Indian village girl'. She instead preferred to be labelled as the village chav with her Juicy Couture tracksuit get-up that matched those owned by Alyssa.

J.W. as a child had been lanky, he had rocked the glasses and bowl cut combo and was incredibly shy. As he matured he had filled out and become broad shouldered and more muscular. He also discovered that he preferred to wear contacts beneath his lab goggles and that a bowl cut hindered his vision in experiments. As a result he had began to receive more attention from the female persuasion. Having always been the person, both in his family and at school, who had retreated into the background, this newfound attention left him uncomfortable. As a result he often sought easy conversation with Elise at large functions.

An excited reunion occurred between Elise and Carla, the high-pitched squealing understandable to
none other than Jen. Jun Wei caught a glimpse of the reunion and rushed over to lift Elise and twirl her around in greeting.

"Oh wow, it seems he hasn't been spending ALL his time in the lab after all," Elise thought, noticing the increased bulge of his biceps. "Hmm, I'll have to get the gossip from Carla tonight."

Angelica Lucas swept by the Bennet crowd on her rounds of the entrance and collected Fran in order to point out significant individuals, sources of scandal and rivals amongst the invited guests. The large crowd was mingling within the extravagant ballroom of the Lucas estate. Marissa disappeared towards the live band, her penchant for drumming and drummer boys causing her to do so. Aly and Cari discovered Mickey amongst a group of other loud teenage girls and they dispersed into the crowds reeking havoc and making inappropriate conversation. This left the two eldest of both the Bennet and Lucas families standing somewhat awkwardly by the door. Jen was quickly dragged away by an unknown handsome man in a tuxedo towards the dance floor. With that, Elise and Carla wandered off towards the chocolate fountain leaving, J.W. to guard the door and prowl for new guests to greet on arrival.

"Els, it has been SO long since we've had a proper gossip session. I have so much to fill you in on. The stupid time difference means you are way behind on the adventures on Carla Lucas," Carla announced to her best friend.

"Gosh, I know Carla. I can't even remember what was going on in your life the last time we spoke properly. Haysus." Carla laughed at Elise's expression of frustration.

"Ok so, first of all: news on the work front?" Elise demanded.

"Uhm, no real news there, still hate my job and all." Carla had been dissatisfied with her job as an Agony Aunt in one of the most popular magazines amongst teenage girls for quite some time. However, she did appreciate the financial stability the job gave her, enabling her to save up until she could live away from her parents, be self-sufficient and thus not tied to their obligations in 'high-society'.

"Next up, news on the Lucas household front."

"Nothing much has changed there either. Bud and Ange are still trying to force personalities the paparazzi will love on us. J.W. is largely engrossed in his work, although he has been spending more time in the gym lately…" She wiggled her eyebrows conspiratorially. Although none of the parties took it seriously, Carla was always teasing J.W. and Elise about a relationship between them. The two women laughed animatedly.

"Oh, and the parental unit are thinking of adopting another kid- they went to Bali over Christmas and decided they wanted another souvenir in the form of a child." Carla loved Bud and Ange. They had raised her from childhood and given her a home and all the material items she wished for, but while the power couple loved each of their six children, their role in the lives of children was largely limited to publicising them. Although they had good intentions, the couple had been somewhat overzealous in their adoptions, considering their own high-maintenance lives. "Actually, not sure if Fran told you, but this is a charity event for an Indonesian orphanage and said orphanage is where they intend to get kiddo numero 7 from."

"Actually I did not know that, but I look forward to meeting number 7 when he or she arrives. Ok, so where does that leave us… oh yes. News on the love life front!"

Carla laughed. "That's not even worth mentioning. Still single, still not looking, still going to be a hardcore cat lady with 24 cats."
"24? I thought we'd agreed 29 was the way to go!"

"Oops sorry, you are indeed correct, my lady. I shall be a spinster with 29 delightful cats. Although really, I think 26 would be best. I could name one for each letter of the alphabet"

"That would be nice. But you could go through the alphabet and have the last three as Ampersand, Asterisk and Underscore. I stick with my original views about there being 29."

"Are we really discussing the names of my 29 cats?" Both ladies giggled uncontrollably.

The two went on to discuss the various aspects of Elise's life, in which the most news was to be found on the work and academia front. They were chatting away whilst dipping marshmallows into the milky chocolate when Carla suddenly stiffened and grabbed her friend's arm.

"Don't look now, but your dad just walked in with two beautiful specimens of MAN!"
"Well, if it isn't my lovely little girl who ran away and left me, her old, lonely father, for the cold and rain of England." David Bennet smirked at Elise as he pulled her in to kiss her cheek. It was strange, as although David and his stepdaughter Marissa shared no genes, the two had perfected the same sarcastic half-smile.

"Well, if it isn't my concerned and caring father, who emailed and phoned constantly while his baby girl was away for a year," Elise responded with a quirked eyebrow, calling her father out for having almost no contact with her over the past year.

"Hey, I called on your birthday!"

"No, I called on my birthday because it was a weekend and I hoped you wouldn't be busy."

"Oh Lisette, you know how it. There's always something I need to see or do at work," he said with a sigh, "You know I love you even if I don't get to talk to you every day."

Elise smiled sadly. She turned to wave Carla over from where she had lingered in order to give Elise and her father some privacy for their reunion.

"Hey, Mr. B!" she greeted him cheerfully.

"Carla, you look beautiful as always. Speaking of beautiful ladies, where's my other lovely daughter?" He asked, just as Jen approached the group from behind.

"Daddy! I missed you!" Jen smiled as she leaned in to wrap her arms around her father and kiss his cheek.

"I missed you too, sweet girl." Jen looked momentarily upset and Elise wondered if she too would reprimand her father for not having been in touch, but she quickly returned to her smiles.

"Actually girls, I'm glad I've got you both here because there's something we need to discuss."

Carla raised her eyebrows at El and then slunk off into the background to give the three some privacy. Elise and Jenine exchanged a concerned look. Their father had never been one for serious conversation. Usually, such topics had to be brought up and he had to be forced into a discussion at which point he would brush off the seriousness with sarcasm.

"I'm not sure if I told you-"

Elise coughed deliberately.

"Alright, Lisette, you've made your point. I shall try to phone more when you are away in the future. Anyhow, as I was saying, lately, the company has come under some scrutiny from the media because of a few recent high profile deals, nothing you need to worry about of course. Basically, there's been a lot of attention on me from the press. Now that the two of you are around again, some of that attention is likely to become focused on you, as you are both the heiresses to the company."

That Elise and Jen were to inherit the company was something of a sore subject to their father. He had wanted the two girls to remain at home and learn the ropes in his thriving publishing house to take over from him. He could not understand their desire to follow different career paths where they would have to 'work their way up from the bottom' and he understood even less their desire to leave
home and move abroad. He had always felt some residual bitterness from losing his ex-wife to her desire for travel.

"Because of this," he continued, "I have decided that it would be best that the two of you have constant protection and from now on, you will both have a bodyguard 24 hours a day."

"Dad, this is ridiculous! It's going to attract even more attention!" Elise argued annoyed at having this decision made for her without her say.

"Elise, at this point there is little you can do to attract more attention. You can try to fight me, but you will not win on this one" her father responded, his tone and use of her given name making clear that his decision was final.

"If you think that's what's best, Daddy…" Jen sweetly assented as Elise grumbled to herself.

"Ok, I'll call them over now so that you can meet them tonight before they start their jobs properly tomorrow"

"Whoa. When you said 'from now on' I had no idea you meant from right this minute!" Elise was growing more irritated. This was her first night back in town, seeing everyone again and she was going to be encumbered with some big muscular doofus.

"Elise, I've already told you that the pressure from the media has been high recently so it is vital that you girls have the proper security effective immediately."

David Bennet waved, beckoning two men standing by the door near J.W. who was looking rather nervous. As the men approached, Elise realised that these were Carla's 'beautiful specimens of man' that her father had entered with. Both men were tall and muscular though aside from this their appearances were completely different.

Then one on the left had strawberry-blond-approaching-ginger hair. His eyes were wide and El wondered if he’d had something to drink because his cheeks showed an intense flush. The one on the right looked uncomfortable to the say the least. His demeanour was stiff, his jaw clenched and his muscles, which were not at all lacking, were on display.

"He might as well have 'I'm a Lumberjack' written on the front of his shirt" she thought, mentally rolling her eyes at this guy. She wondered if he had any missing teeth and brought her eyes up to his face. They briefly made eye contact and Elise felt her skin break out in goosebumps. His eyes were incredibly bright, a pale greenish grey colour. His face certainly didn't look like it was going to be missing any teeth. The man was tanned, his skin approaching the shade of melted toffee. Elise briefly found herself wondering if it tasted as sweet as it looked and almost smacked herself. His hair was unruly and curly but simultaneously looked soft and clean, it was long and a single curl was falling onto his forehead.

Just like his daughter, David Bennet was assessing the appearances of the two men he was appointing as his daughter's bodyguards. Although he had ridden with them from his office to the Lucas estate, he hadn't bothered taking in their appearances properly until this moment. The two men had been sent by a reputable agency and prior to this David had not pondered whether or not they would be suited to guarding his daughters.

He was attempting to decide which goon to assign to which girl. "The ginger looks like a right softie. I can just see Elise giving him swirlies. He'll have to go to Jen, that girl doesn't give anyone trouble."

The two men stood before the trio of Bennets.
"Girls this is..." David realised that the two men must at some point mentioned their names however he had obviously been focused elsewhere and now was at a loss. He briefly contemplated calling them 'Grouchy Goon and Ginger Goon' before 'Ginger Goon' jumped in.

"Charles Bingley," he stated. He smiled and held out his hand for the two girls to shake, his cheeks somehow managing to pinken even further. Both girls smiled back at him.

"Darcy."

"A real friendly guy, this one is." Elise thought to herself after Darcy's abrupt introduction. He neither made eye contact with any of them nor did he hold out his hand to shake.

"Yes, well, Bingley, you will be bodyguard to my elder daughter Jenine-" he gestured at the blond girl.

Elise watched as Jen and Bingley made Bambi eyes at each other. "Hmph. Twitterpated," she thought, rolling her eyes. She looked away from the two and was amused to find Darcy doing the same. She half-smiled at him but he maintained his scowl perfectly.

"Darcy, you will be guarding my younger daughter Elise," David instructed motioning at El. "You will be keeping the girls safe 24 hours a day. Where they go, I expect you to follow."

"Except the bathroom," he added as an afterthought. "I expect you not to follow my daughters to the bathroom. I'm sure you kids can figure out the finer details between yourselves." He had clearly had enough of them, as he made something of a shooing gesture at the girls and their bodyguards and disappeared towards the bar.

"Miss Jenine, would you like to dance?" Bingley offered, blushing further. He seemed to have a permanent flush and the presence of Jen appeared to add to it further.

"Oh I'd love to," Jen smiled " but please, call me Jen."

"Jen..." he said as if testing the sound of her name. He beamed at her. "Then you must call me Charlie." Bingley placed his hand on the middle of Jen's back and gently led her towards where couples were swaying to the live band.

Elise realised she had been left alone with Darcy. "So..." she began, "do you dance at all?"

"I try to avoid it," came the curt response.

"I'll try to avoid you," she muttered under her breath, turning her back to him and navigating through the crowd to find Carla. She would not be attempting any further conversation with that grouchy asshole.

Darcy was standing in a corner glowering. He was annoyed that what he thought was going to be a job guarding important individuals, whose ideas could shape the future of the world, was actually a stint as a goon for some girl who was of no significance at all. Still, the man took his job seriously and from his position in the corner he was following her movements with his eyes.

"She may not be significant, but those eyes of hers certainly are," he found himself thinking. He'd noticed when they were first introduced that she had the finest set of eyes he'd ever seen, amongst other favourable assets. Of course, these assets were unlikely to be real, but the eyes most definitely were.
Her eyes were brown and at first unremarkable, however her irises were unusually large, giving them a doll-like appearance. Furthermore thick, dark lashes framed them and when she looked up from under them, Darcy's heart seemed to do strange things. Her eyes were clear and almost glassy and when the light hit them at a certain angle or her eyes filled with tears of laughter, there were moments her eyes suddenly seemed grey.

She looked in his direction and he pretended not to have noticed, ignoring her gaze. She was telling her friend, who appeared to be the daughter of the hosts, a story. Her conversation was animated and she was smiling, her nose wrinkling at the bridge as she laughed.

He looked away from her and his eyes found Bingley and the blond girl amongst a crowd. They had shared several dances and Darcy could tell his friend was smitten. The song that was playing ended and the two of them broke apart. She smiled at him and spoke, nodding in the direction of her sister and her companion. Bingley smiled back, his face beet red. Once he had seen her join in the conversation with Elise and Carla, Bingley turned to walk towards Darcy's corner.

"Oh jeez. Here he comes, to spread some stupid joy," Darcy thought. Bingley was so pleasant, that sometimes Darcy had to restrain himself from punching his friend. He was convinced that it was unnatural to be so jovial all the time. No matter how hard he tried, Darcy could not find a time when his friend was in a bad mood. Even when he'd deliberately called Bingley from England at 4am 'just for a chat' the man had been as chirpy as ever. "Douchebag."

"Darcy, dude, why are you just standing here? We're at a party! Look more alive!"

"Charlie, I'm working. I don't like to play on the job."

"Darce, it's the first night. You're supposed to be getting to know your charge." Bingley sighed as Darcy ignored him. "Alright then, let's get something to drink."

The two men moved to stand by the bar. Darcy almost rolled his eyes when he realised that from where they were now standing Bingley had a better view of Jenine Bennet and her friend. He noted that his charge seemed to have disappeared, but as Bingley had pointed out, they were not technically on the job tonight and so Elise Bennet was not his problem right now.

"I think I'm going to like this job," Bingley told his friend eagerly.

"No surprises there," Darcy replied sardonically.

"Jen is so lovely, she's so beautiful and kind. She's a teacher you know?"

Darcy mumbled, not really listening to Bingley enumerating all of Jane's positive qualities.

"She's an angel!"

"She seems nice," Darcy said non-committedly.

"What about Elise? What's she like?"

"Ok, I guess."

"Have you even spoken to her?" Bingley chastised.

"Yeah, you were there when we were introduced. Although your focus was somewhere else entirely."
"No, I mean have you tried to get to know her? You know, to find out a bit about her, even if it's just to gauge what her schedule is like?"

"Charlie, just because you got the pretty one and you guys hit it off doesn't mean you have to harass me about becoming BFFs with my charge. She's just a client."

"Dude, why don't you just ask her to dance or something? Just to be polite and stuff."

"Bingley, why don't you understand? I have absolutely no interest in getting to know my Kim-Kardashian-bimbo charge. All I need to know are her whereabouts and I can find those out without spending any extra time with her. She's not completely ugly but she's not pretty or smart enough for me to want to devote any more time to her than absolutely necessary."

Bingley sighed, realising there was no point arguing any further with his stubborn friend. Darcy wasn't an asshole, he was just a nice guy in an asshole shell.

Elise had exited the bathroom, the entrance to which was right by the bar, when she had overheard the Darcy and Bingley's conversation. Bingley was mooning over Jen and her numerous attributes.

"Aww, they're just so cute!" She had just been listening to Jen's proclamations about how Charlie was 'the nicest guy ever…he's just so… nice!' The two of them were so sweet it was almost sickening. If they ever had babies, those kids would probably be able to end war and world hunger by pouting and turning corrupt politicians into bumbling softies.

Elise almost snorted when she heard Bingley ask Darcy if he'd spoken to her, thinking of how he seemed incapable of anything other than one-word answers. She knew she shouldn't have been eavesdropping and should either leave or alert them to her presence, but when Bingley asked Darcy what he thought of her, she couldn't help but keep listening.

If she had known that he would essentially call her both stupid and ugly she might have decided against continuing her espionage. She was seething as she heard him compare her to Kim Kardashian. "Not pretty or smart enough'? Hmph. It's not like you're a catch, grinch!"

Elise stormed off, not caring if they noticed her presence. She went to find Carla and Jen so she could rant about the horrible man she was going to be stuck with.

Darcy caught a glimpse of moonstone fabric and bouncing chestnut ringlets from the corner of his eye and realised that his conversation with Bingley had been overheard by it's very subject.

"Oh shit," he thought to himself although unsure of why her opinion mattered to him.

For the rest of the evening Elise alternated between making rude comments about Darcy, imitating his haughtiness and glaring at him. Jen attempted to calm her down, but was unable and both she and Carla grew weary of Elise's ranting. When at last the evening ended, Elise chose to ride home with her stepmother and stepsisters over riding with Jen, her father and the two bodyguards.

When Elise got into bed that night, she bitterly came to the conclusion that Darcy's distaste for her was actually a good thing. If he didn't want to spend time with her, so be it. She didn't want a bodyguard anyway. She would spare him the trouble of her company and it would be a win-win situation.
Chapter 4

Somehow, Elise awoke the next day in a surprisingly good mood. The sunlight was streaming through the blinds covering her window. Usually she would have been annoyed at being woken up relatively early when she had gone to sleep so late the night before, but she couldn't help the smile on her face the sun brought out. She rolled over in bed and reached to grab her phone off the nightstand. J.W. had started a game of scramble with her and she played him back. He'd won the round by several hundred points. She scrolled down the list of words he'd found, laughing when she saw 'TITS' amongst them.

Elise saw an alert on her phone telling her she had a new email. She braced herself before checking it. She'd applied months ago to several institutions for medical school and she had received and been to interviews from the majority of those she'd applied for. She had yet to hear responses from any of them. She'd started checking her email before every meal and every time she heard her phone 'ping!' her heart started to accelerate. She knew that it would take a while for responses to come but as time passed she couldn't help her growing anxiety.

As she opened her inbox, she could hear the pounding of her heart in her ears, her palms so sweaty that wrapped her bed sheet around the phone so that it wouldn't slip from her hands as she gripped it tightly. She saw that the email was indeed from one of the medical schools she had applied to and her heart rate somehow managed to increase further.

'Dear Miss Bennet'

"That's my name. MY NAME. This email is for me. Oh gosh. Wait... what's in it?" She abandoned her inner monologue to read further.

'We thank you for your application and attendance at interviews'

"BLAH BLAH BLAH"

'You are being offered a place at our institution's Medical School in the fall of 2012"

"YES!" she half shrieked- half hissed, jumping out of bed and bouncing up and down. She was suddenly aware that the noise she was making had probably woken the rest of the family. She abruptly stopped her movements and waited for the influx of family members rushing through her door, asking what was going on.

Nothing happened.

"Well, that was anticlimactic."

She suddenly found she had an excess of pent up energy, her hands trembling and her heart still racing. The sun was shining, she was energetic. It all seemed to add up to a swim before breakfast. Elise changed into a ratty, old swimsuit and hunted out her goggles from a drawer of random stuff (including a whoopee cushion). She contemplated her hair in the mirror. Somehow, Jen's handiwork had survived the night and the ringlets were still in place. She decided to attempt to savour the ringlets and grabbed a swimming cap out of the drawer of random stuff. She also sought out a towel and some sunscreen before donning a pair of shorts, an old t-shirt and some flip-flops. She took the stairs down and left via the back door out the kitchen.

The Bennet House was no mere house. Elise, who had lived in a small though upmarket studio apartment whilst in England suddenly felt as though her home was a holiday resort. The house itself
was large, though nothing compared to the Lucas home. It did however have numerous unnecessary features including the elevator, a gym- complete with top of the range equipment- and a billiard room (just like Cluedo!).

The grounds were what made the Bennet home prime property. On their lands was a tennis court, a swimming pool and a guesthouse. It was a short while before Elise approached the pool, and at one point, Fran had bought a golf cart for ease of travel from the house to the pool area. The guesthouse, which had once been David Bennet's safe haven, overlooked the pool. It appeared that now even the guesthouse, filled with his books was not far away enough from Fran and her girls for David.

Elise laid down her towel on one of the deck chairs by the side of the pool. She shed her shorts and t-shirt and grabbed her swimming cap. "How to do this?" she wondered. She twisted her hair up and held it there with the wrist of her right hand. She then used her fingers on both hands to stretch the swimming cap wide and bring it down as fast as she could over her head. She tucked in the stray hairs as best as she could. She stood up, walked to the edge of the deep end and dived right in.

"Should have known it was too good to last."

She retrieved her cap from the pool floor and threw it over the edge of the pool at the shallow end, by the guesthouse. Her long hair flowed down her shoulders and back, now ringlet free. She looked at it sadly, shrugged, and resumed swimming laps up and down the pool, her hair swirling about her.

Unbeknownst to Elise, David Bennet had been incredibly serious about his two eldest daughters having 24/7 protection and in keeping with this, had installed the two hired bodyguards in the guesthouse of his family's home.

When they had arrived at their new residence the evening before, Charles Bingley, consistent with his giving nature, had offered his friend the room with the better view and French windows leading onto the poolside. Darcy, fatigued and in no mood to argue with his friend over who should take the better room, accepted the offer. He had glanced around the room briefly before unpacking his toiletries as well as an undershirt and track pants to sleep in. He proceeded to get ready for bed, climb in and fall asleep without checking whether the curtains on the French windows were closed or not.

As the sun now shone brightly and the landscape was no longer pitch black, Darcy came to the realisation that he had not closed the curtains when he was awoken by rays of light. He was groggy and disgruntled. He had dreamed of a woman, whose face he had no memory of other than a pair of clear brown eyes, beckoning him forth with her finger. He would move towards her, only to find she was the same distance away.

Suddenly, a head of long brown hair emerged from the water at the far end of the pool that he realised he was looking onto.

"Mermaid!" his groggy mind gasped.

Her hair was so long that it covered her shoulders and chest as she stood at the far end of the pool heaving deep breaths. Darcy was positive this woman had nothing other than her hair covering her. In his half-asleep state, having just awoken from chasing a mystery woman, his mind demanded that he learn more about this mermaid.

Without really registering his actions, Darcy opened the French windows and stepped out onto the poolside his mermaid had disappeared underwater. Though he was gradually waking up with the
sunlight and spring breeze on his face, something still compelled him to move forward and discover her. He walked towards the edge of the pool nearest to him, surveying the far end of the pool. Had he been looking where he was going, he would have noticed a piece of wet blue silicone at his feet. Alas, he had not and he did not, and so it was with a loud splash and bump of his tailbone on the pool wall that he slipped into the water.

He stood in the water now fully awake and rubbing just above his bum where a bruise was most definitely going to form.

"Idiot! You should have realised from the dream, there was no way you were going to catch a mysterious mermaid woman!" he berated himself.

Elise who had been nostalgically indulging in her childhood game of swimming the lap of the pool underwater and counting the green tiles in the mosaic of the pool floor had not noticed the intruder in the water with her. She knew she was approaching the wall of the shallow end as the frequency of green tiles was diminishing, but she kept her face down to ensure she counted every last one.

Her surprise, when her eyes were met with a pair of manly feet on the pool floor, was great and she swam upwards lifting her head only to accidentally ram head first into the crotch of the individual in front of her.

"Oof! FUUUCK!" Darcy grunted and swore loudly hunching over in agony and covering his crotch.

Elise stood before him, still shocked and unsure as to whom she had head-butted, as all she could see of the recipient of her head-butt was a mop of dark curls. Elise began to apologise when Darcy popped up his head frowning intensely, though his body was still bent over and his hands still covered his crotch. Elise looked at him in confusion and annoyance; unsure whether or not she was still sorry.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'll tell you what I was not doing! I was definitely not asking for this!" he said, gesturing to his crotch, annoyed at her annoyed tone.

Elise glanced down and then brought her eyes back up to his face, lingering on the way over his chest. Through his wet white shirt, the muscles of his chest and abdomen were deliciously visible as well as what looked to be a small tattoo on his ribs on his left side. She realised she was licking her lips and quickly snapped her eyes back up to his.

"I'm not at your house. I'm at your pool and I'm only here because I came out of my residence," his arm flailing behind him in the direction of the guesthouse, "slipped and fell in. Believe me, I had no intention of encountering you."

"Hmph."

Elise realised that he was staying on her family property, thereby making her plans for avoiding him slightly more difficult. Having had enough of him, she swam to the side of the pool, climbed out, redressed, gathered her belonging and turned her back on him, walking away in the direction of the house. Darcy watched her retreating form, frustrated, disorientated and facing some lingering pain.
"What do you mean you're going back again?" Elise, now freshly showered and feeling more peaceful, sat in the kitchen chatting with her older sister.

"Well the school year isn't up yet. This is Easter break, and usually I wouldn't have come back but I had a job interview over here. So basically I have two weeks here, which means I can come scout out potential apartments with you in case you decide to go to San Diego…" she paused to squeal. When Elise had told Jen about her place at medical school, Jen too had squealed and bounced up and down."…and then I have to go back again for like, 6 weeks and then I'm home again!"

"I'm going to miss you over those 6 weeks," Elise made a show of pouting before returning to her smiles, "but I'm so gloriously happy right now I'll whine about it later."

"I'm so happy too, Ellie! It's great to be home, I missed everyone, especially you. And, oh gosh, everyone here is so great! Even Charles! And we just met and he's so sweet!"

Elise giggled at her sister and Jen blushed realising she was gushing.

"Are you still hating on Darcy?"

"I'm not hating on him, we just have a mutual dislike."

"Oh Ellie, he doesn't dislike you! He just has a frowny face."

"Well if he didn't dislike me yesterday, he definitely does today. I may have head-butted his family jewels."

"You may have- his- you- you what?" Jen spluttered.

Elise grinned.

Elise and Jen had chatted for most of the morning and they had made plans for a trip to San Diego. Elise wanted to spend a few days there checking out the university again and looking for suitable apartments. Elise decided she would head down there on Thursday, a mere 4 days away. Jen whose job interview was on Friday decided she would join her sister for the weekend. They'd decided to look into hotels as soon as possible, as they were going to be hard pressed to find a booking.

After lunch, Elise was still feeling the buzz of her recent university acceptance and she decided to channel it into something productive. She decided a trip to the bookstore was in order. She could buy some of the books she needed for next year, and she could even read through the basic stuff while she was free on holiday, she rationalised to herself ambitiously.

Elise knew that this was exactly the kind of errand that her father had hired Darcy to chaperone her for, but she was determined to evade him. All though Jen was her closest confidant, she knew that sharing her plan to sneak out with Jen would be a terrible idea. Jen was always looking out for her safety and she would likely either guilt trip Elise into taking Darcy with her or she would "accidentally" let it slip to Darcy. In a nice way, of course.

It would be best to sneak out without letting anyone know, including Hill. She decided that it wasn't too far for her to walk and so she changed into comfy shoes, went out the side door, peering out first to make sure that neither bodyguard was there and then speedwalked out the driveway. She walked fairly briskly to her destination, periodically turning to check that Darcy had not found her. On arrival she quickly forgot his existence, as well as the existence of the rest of the world, becoming engrossed in browsing through books.
After sitting with a pack of frozen peas on his crotch for half an hour, Darcy had been unpacking and becoming accustomed to his surroundings all morning. He assumed that Elise would call the guesthouse when she needed his services. That's what all these Kim Kardashian types did. He had seen her mother and her sisters. There was no doubt in his mind about what 'type' she was. However, when she had not called for him by the early afternoon he grew somewhat confused.

When Jenine called to inform Bingley she was headed out and to ask if he'd meet her at the main house, Bingley was on his feet in an instant and Darcy decided to tag along. He was realising the wisdom in Bingley's advice to get to know his charge and establish an idea of her schedule.

Jen greeted them at the door, smiling. She seemed surprised to see Darcy with her bodyguard and when he inquired as to the whereabouts of her sister, Jen's confusion increased.

"Oh, well, I actually thought you were with her, since I didn't think she was home," she replied, puzzled.

"Are you sure? She definitely never called the guesthouse for me, so I didn't think she would have gone anywhere."

"I'll just run upstairs and check if she's in her room," she said, hurrying away.

"Darce, didn't she tell you if she had any plans for today yesterday?" Bingley asked reproachfully, knowing perfectly well that Darcy hadn't had the chance to ask Elise of her plans in the short time they had spoken.

"I assumed she would call me when I was required."

"I really don't think she's at home," Jen said as she came down the stairs. "I'm pretty sure I remember her saying she wanted to go to the bookstore this afternoon to pick up some of the textbooks she needed for medical school."

Darcy's eyebrows rose slightly at the mention of Elise Bennet attending medical school. Kim Kardashian types did not go to medical school.

"Maybe she… forgot to call you?" Jen suggested, though not really believing it herself. Her sister was a wilful woman and Jen would not be surprised if Elise had deliberately left Darcy behind. Feeling that she should abide by her fathers instructions, Jen felt it best to direct Darcy to her sister. She knew her sister's preferred bookstore, as she should, considering the amount of time Elise spent there. She told Darcy where he would find Elise on Sunset Blvd and he quickly left with long and fast strides.

"Well, at least he seems to be walking ok…" she thought to herself as she watched him disappear.

Darcy entered the bookstore annoyed and somewhat out of breath. Who was this woman he was babysitting? She was obviously not the type of girl he had expected her to be. He found his way into the textbook section but she was nowhere in sight. He cursed under his breath.

He kept walking to the back of the store, until he spotted her. She was standing in the middle of two shelves, lined with old, worn out books. The shelves themselves were old and wooden. She was holding a tattered looking paperback in her hands and smiling to herself. His breath hitched. Instead of entering into the same gap as she, he walked to the other side of the bookcase and peered at her through the gap left by the absence of the novel she was holding.

"How am I supposed to guard you if I don't know where you are?" he demanded in a low voice.
Startled, Elise did the first thing that came to mind when she heard a bookcase speaking to her and slammed the book she was holding right back into its slot. Angry bookcase speaks to you; you damn well give it its book back! In doing so, Elise bonked Darcy on the nose. Hard. Immediately his eyes begun to water and he scrunched up his face, pained.

It dawned on Elise that in general bookcases did not speak in voices astonishingly similar to that of her bodyguard. She walked around the shelf and found him clutching his nose.

"Haven't you snuck up on me enough today? Look, I know you don't want to be trailing me and to be perfectly honest I really don't want you following me around constantly. I thought I was saving us some trouble coming here without you."

Darcy, in a state of some shock stumbled over his words. "Look, uh, Miss Bennet... I… uh… I need to be able to do my job. Your father has asked me to be a bodyguard to you and that is what I intend to do. I… I understand that this may not be what you desire..." he trailed off. Most girls would be glad to have a strong man protecting them, wouldn't they? And even if he hadn't shown them the time of day, girls definitely appreciated (and ogled) Darcy's presence. What was not to desire?

"Whatever, I'll call you next time," Elise said, resigned to her fate.

She proceeded to pay for her purchases- and there were a good few- and before she could gather up the heavy bags, Darcy had already scooped them up. She glared at him, but when she remembered how many books she had bought, she smirked and decided to leave him to it. She marched off in the direction of home, Darcy trailing behind her.

As he remembered the earlier agony his groin had experience and felt the remaining sting from his nose and the weight of the ten tonnes of books in his arms, Darcy came to a conclusion.

"This woman is going to be the death of me."
Chapter 5

Elise sat in her powder blue 1965 Volkswagen Beetle, waiting for 'His Royal Heinous' as she was now mentally calling Darcy. Her duffle bag was packed and in the trunk and she was awaiting his arrival with his own luggage so they could start on the journey.

"Now who's the Kim Kardashian Bimbo?" she thought to herself, her impatience growing. She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel.

When she had returned from the library on Sunday night, she and Jen had looked online for a hotel with 4 available rooms, but vacancies were scarce. None of the hotels had more than one available room considering the influx of people for the warm weather and Easter vacation. Even if Jenine and Elise shared one room and the two bodyguards another, they still needed an additional room. Jenine had voiced her concerns to Charlie, and he had told her that he had a cousin who was a concierge at a hotel who might be able to help them. He neglected to add that his cousin Carrie would be particularly willing to help if she heard that Darcy would be staying as well.

On Tuesday evening, whilst at dinner with Jen (the third meal they were having alone together since he had started the job) Bingley told her the good news. His cousin had managed to find them four rooms. Unfortunately, two of the rooms were on one floor while the other two were on another. Bingley suggested 'for the girls safety, of course', that each bodyguard be on the same floor as his charge. "And anyway, it makes more sense since you guys are going two days ahead of Jen and I," he had said. Once this was agreed, he then deigned to inform Darcy and Elise that each pair of rooms was connecting.

Elise was brought back to the present when Darcy opened the door of the passenger side. "We're going in this? This is your car?" Darcy asked. His tone was not malicious, his expression showing that he was, in fact, discombobulated.

"If you have an issue with Betty, you can find some other way to get to San Diego," she responded, already annoyed.

"Betty?" Darcy asked, his confusion heightening.


"Your car… is called Betty," he said slowly, as the information registered.

"That's what I just said."

"Ok… um, I'm just going to put this in the boot," he said gesturing behind him to his duffle bag. She noted with annoyance that it was exactly the same as her brown Kipling duffle.

She tapped on the wheel some more as she waited for him to go about this. This was going to be the longest amount of time she would be spending in his company thus far. Since Sunday, she had hardly seen him. Other than a quick trip to the supermarket and a short coffee date with Carla, she hadn't been out of the house and therefore hadn't required his presence. She had been online looking for hotels and once that was sorted out, looking into apartments and calling to set up viewings.

Darcy climbed into the car and turned to look at Elise. Elise, not in the least intimidated, stared right back and they held eye contact.

"Ready to go?" she questioned him.
"Yup."

"Okay then, off we go."

It was a hot morning and even with the windows down, in the slow moving traffic within the city, the inside of Betty was stuffy. Elise had forgone her cardigan but even so, she could feel her hair starting to frizz and her face becoming flushed. Darcy, in his black T-shirt and jeans had sweat glistening on his forehead.

She couldn't wait until they it the highway and they started actually moving. Although there was no hurry to get to San Diego, Elise had never been the patient type. The silence in the car thus far was also beginning to seem uncomfortable to her.

The traffic began to move again, but Elise's satisfaction was short-lived when once more the cars in front of her slowed. Darcy grunted in annoyance. Elise began tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. Her companion glared at her fingers and sighed.

This did nothing to dissuade Elise, instead she continued at her drumming with increased fervour. She kept her head turned forward, but from the corner of her eye she could see Darcy squinting at her in irritation.

Darcy was becoming more and more flustered. The heat inside the car combined with his lack of patience and his companion's incessant tapping was making him extremely antsy. He ran his fingers through his hair pulling it slightly. He began fidgeting in his seat and loosening the seat belt. He opened the glove compartment, eliciting a glare from Elise. In it, he found a flier and he began flapping himself.

Elise, in part vexed by his fidgeting, but mostly peeved that he could cool himself down while she had to drive, couldn't restrain herself.

"Could you stop that, please?" she said through gritted teeth.

"Don't you have an AC in here?"

"Nope," she responded, popping the 'p' sound.

"I'm just trying to keep cool. The heat is unbearable!"

There was no way Elise was going to allow him to keep cool while she suffered.

"It's distracting me from driving."

"But we're not even moving!" he said, exasperated.

"It's still a distraction."

"Fine."

He put the flier back into the glove compartment slamming it shut. She squinted at him.

"It's not Betty's fault it's a hot day."

"Well, Betty needs to fucking get herself some air conditioning," Darcy muttered. "God it's so freaking hot. If she's not going to let me fan myself..." a thought occurred to Darcy and he unbuckled his seat belt.
Elise turned to look at him warily. "What are you doing?" she demanded, just as he whipped his T-shirt off.

"I need to keep cool somehow," he said, smirking as he caught her grudgingly checking him out.

"Oh jeez. Now this is definitely a distraction..."

Once they got on to the motorway, the atmosphere within Betty improved. There was more air circulation, resulting in Darcy and Elise feeling calmer and less hostile. Darcy took out his iPhone and began typing what seemed to Elise to be a very long email. He was in actuality writing an email to his younger sister, Georgie as he had promised to keep her up-to-date on what was going on in his life. The windows were still opened and the breeze that entered through them relaxed Darcy enough that he drifted off into sleep.

Elise was largely focused on driving, however when she found the peaceful atmosphere within the car alarmingly silent, she spared Darcy a glance. What she found surprised her. In slumber, his expression was boyish and free of worries. His frown lines were absent and he seemed entirely at ease. She found herself wondering if he ever had such an expression when awake and fully conscious.

The remainder of the journey passed by relatively smoothly. Before she had finished mentally making a list of things she should be sure to check for in prospective apartments, the Pacific Ocean was within her sight. She couldn't help but smile as she inhaled the salty fragrance of the air. After that, it wasn't too long until she found herself driving within San Diego.

Darcy was jolted awake by the sound of a car horn, and upon realising that he had slept for the majority of the journey, he felt somewhat embarrassed. He found himself wondering if Elise had been disappointed at the loss of his conversation. He turned to look at her and noticed a faint smile playing on her lips, as Elise was still feeling the calm that had washed over her with the exposure to the sea air.

Elise parked Betty in the hotel parking space. She and Darcy retrieved their bags from the boot and entered the lobby. They were quickly relieved of their bags by a bellboy and the two went approached the front desk.

Elise watched as Darcy's eyes doubled in size at the appearance of a woman with red curls and redder lips behind the desk.

"Just kill me now," Darcy muttered under his breath.

Elise turned to look at him, perturbed. From her name badge, on which the name 'Carrie Bingley' was embedded and what appeared to be familial red hair, the concierge appeared to be Charlie's cousin.

"Oooh Willy, it's so good to see you again!" Carrie Bingley exclaimed as her eyes wandered over the planes of his chest. Feeling mildly exposed, he was suddenly extremely glad that he had put back on his T-shirt before entering the hotel.

"Uh, yeah. Good to see you too, Carrie," he responded uncertainly.

"You must be Elise Bennet!" Carrie said finally drawing her eyes away from Darcy's chest and to Elizabeth's face. "Oh my, I have heard so much about you! Not just from Cousin Charlie, also from E! and oh wow, I am such a huge fan of your mom's clothing line! I bought the same miniskirt in
three different colours, I loved it so much!" Elise tried to smile back at the woman, but her expression was more of a grimace as she envisioned the horror of a miniskirt designed by Francissa Bennet.

In not too long, with a few interruptions of 'please tell her I loved the mesh top in last year's fall collection' and 'oh Willy, have you done something to your hair?' Elise and Darcy were checked in. Their bags already taken to their rooms, Carrie pointed them in the direction of the lifts before requesting Darcy that they 'catch up soon'. As the lift doors closed and Elise pressed the button for their floor, Darcy exhaled loudly.

"Everything ok?" she asked, unable to restrain her curiosity.

"Of all the hotels in San Diego, why this one?" he responded, sounding genuinely exasperated.

"Oh, well actually, I didn't really pick it. We were having trouble finding vacancies and Charlie called in a favour with his cousin to get us rooms here."

They had arrived at their floor and as she stepped out the elevator doors, she was certain she heard Darcy mutter 'gonna kill that bastard'. They found their rooms, side by side and before entering hers Elise told Darcy "Um, I'm just going to take a shower and freshen up and stuff, but we have a couple of appointments after lunch."

He nodded at her and they both entered their respective rooms. Darcy decided that after the warmth at the start of their journey, he too needed a shower. He also felt an irrational need to wash the tracks of Carrie Bingley's stare from his body. He unzipped the brown duffle in search of some clean clothes.

On the other side of their connecting door, Elise was also unzipping a brown duffle bag. On the top, she found what looked to be a dishcloth. Picking it up with the tips of her fingers, she discovered that it was, in fact, a dishcloth shaped rather like a kitten. From the looks of it, the grey fabric kitten had once been considerably more cream coloured and considerably less flaccid. She wondered if this was some sort of elaborate prank of Alyssa's.

Darcy delved blindly into his bag in search of a clean T-shirt. He was suddenly surprised by the texture his fingers were met with. He certainly did not own a lacy T-shirt. He pulled out the offending article and his eyes widened as he found a pale blue lacy bra dangling from his fingers. He quickly realised that this bag was not his and stuffed the bra back inside, zipping it up as fast as he could. He opened the connecting door between his and Elise's room, just as it opened from the other side.

"I think I have your-"

"This isn't my-"

They both spoke at the same time and blushed. They hurriedly swapped the bags, almost throwing them at each other as if they were hot potatoes about to burn their hands. Quickly, the connecting door was closed from both sides.

Less than an hour later, Elise was brushing her hair when she heard knocking at the door. She went to open the room door, only to discover that there was no one outside. She went back to trying to tame her unruly waves. However as she arrived at the mirror, she heard the knocking again. When she looked out the peephole of the room door there was still nobody there although the knocking had not ceased. She quickly realised that the sound was in fact coming from the connecting door. Intrigued, she opened it and found herself face-to-face a fresh-faced, nice-smelling Darcy.
"Uh, hi… I was just wondering… did you… um… did you want to get lunch?"

She cocked her head to the side, befuddled. "You mean with you?"

"Yeah… I thought… it's ok… never mind…" he started to retreat into his room.

She halted him by placing a hand on his forearm. "Let's get lunch. We both have to eat right?" He smiled in response and Elise blinked a couple of times, disconcerted. "Um… just let me finish up here."

He sat in a chair watching as she bundled her hair into a messy topknot. She quickly grabbed her purse and they set off. It was just as warm in San Diego as in LA and they opted to walk and find somewhere to eat rather than drive around in stuffy Betty. They walked in companionable silence looking at shops and people-watching. They passed by an Italian restaurant and Elise eyed Darcy quinking her eyebrow in question. He shrugged and they continued walking. They passed a little boy who was determinedly pulling his nervous-looking father by the hand and leading him into a toy store. Elise let out a giggle and Darcy smiled genuinely at her, deep dimples evident in both his cheeks.

They both halted suddenly outside a burger bar and exchanged looks. Elise nodded and Darcy smiled, walking ahead and holding the door open for her. They were seated at a booth and given menus by a blonde waitress who eyed Darcy as if he were something to eat. Darcy ordered a beef burger and a chocolate shake. When Elise asked for a salmon teriyaki burger and a vanilla shake, he wrinkled his nose at her.

"What?" she demanded.

"Salmon teriyaki burger?" He was still wrinkling his nose, although he was smiling simultaneously, making his expression something of a grimace.

"Hey! You have your manly man meal and leave my salmon teriyaki burger alone."

"Ok, ok," he replied, raising his hands.

They chatted until their food arrived, Darcy asking Elise how many apartments they would be seeing today. Elise explained that they wouldn't be seeing any today and that they were going to see two different agents.

When the burgers arrived, Darcy dove in and devoured his almost immediately. Elise was only half way through when he had finished.

"I take it it was good then?" she asked smirking.

"Yeah it was," he smiled, "how's the salmon teriyaki?"

"So good!" she responded, with her mouth full.

He laughed and watched with amusement as she chewed vigorously. She was certainly not what he expected. In his experience, most girls in her position (and with her figure) were the salad eating type. Granted, this was no manly man burger, but it was refreshing to see her tucking into her meal without reservation.

She caught him staring. "You want to try?" He shrugged. She speared a piece of the fish for him and held it out on her fork to him. He bit it off and chewed contemplatively.
"Hmm… this is actually really good!"

"Told you so!" she laughed.

Once she was done eating, they argued a little over who would be paying. "Who's the boss here?" she demanded.

He snorted, but backed down. "I concede defeat, but I'll get it next time," he said before realising what he was implying.

In the evening, Elise found herself back in her room about to take her second shower of the day due to the heat. She was surprised to find that spending the day alone with Darcy hadn't been as awful as she had expected.

She still thought him obnoxious. At both her meetings with the agents, she had specified her desires and they recommended several apartments they thought suited her needs, setting up viewings for the ones she agreed to see. Darcy would interject from time to time, asking suspicious questions about the security at each location. He certainly took his job very seriously, she thought, rolling her eyes. She had expected him to be stoic, but instead he was hassling the agents like some over-protective father.

When they'd walked around the city going from her first meeting to the second, they'd stopped at an ice-cream stand and he'd bought them each two scoops, keeping his promise from lunchtime. On the way back from their second appointment, they had each bought their own sandwich for dinner. Darcy went for roast beef and, once more, Darcy laughed at her choice, this time of tuna. He was a little high-handed, she supposed, but not completely awful. She was hesitant to admit this however, remembering his comments from the first night they'd met. She stepped under the shower, smiling, the spray of cool water pleasant after a day in the warmth.
Feeling fresh and clean, Elise climbed out the shower and wrapped herself in one of the hotel towels. She checked herself out in the giant mirror, made a few silly faces and exited into her room. Grabbing a set of pyjamas from the closet, she started to head over to the bed. She wasn't looking where she was going, trying to hang on to her towel and simultaneously not drop anything from her arms. She failed to notice the TV remote, lying on the floor, and stepped right on to it turning on the TV.

The TV switched on at full volume to a crime show, just as one of the characters shot a gun. The gunshot rang out loudly through her room. Annoyed, Elise dumped her clothes on to the bed and bent to pick up the offending remote, the towel that had been around her falling off in the process.

Darcy had been typing yet another email to Georgie, in the hopes that this one would elicit a reply from her. He was startled at the sound of a gunshot and as soon as he realised that the sound had emanated from Elise's room, he was jerked into action. He grabbed his handgun from the drawer of his side table and ran to the connecting door, yanking it open from his side, and kicking it down from Elise's.

The sight that met him as he stood in the threshold of her room was definitely not what he had expected. A stark naked Elise was facing away from him with a towel at her feet. She was bending over and reaching for the remote on the floor. The loud volume of the TV meant that she hadn't noticed his entrance, and had yet to realise the eyeful she was giving him. She pressed the red button on the remote, and stood.

"Shit," came a high-pitched voice from behind her.

She turned and her eyes widened as she saw Darcy staring at her his eyes popping and his mouth hanging slightly open. She looked down, to where his eyes were focused on her and realised her state of undress. Grabbing the towel from the floor, she hurriedly tried to cover herself.

"What are you doing here?" she shrieked, her voice shrill. Darcy, still shell-shocked didn't respond and stood rooted to his spot. "Darcy!" Elise was wondering why he was just standing there like an imbecile. "DARCY! GET OUT!" she hollered.

Darcy awoke from his stupor and scampered out the room. Elise, disgruntled and confused, stood there for a minute before she resumed getting dressed, muttering under her breath. "Asshole, yes I realised that, but pervert?"

On return to his room, Darcy sat on his bed, flopped back, and stared at the ceiling. "Shit. Shit! SHIT!" he swore loudly. Elise was obviously not being shot. A bullet wound was one thing he had definitely not seen on her body. And he had seen almost everything. There was no doubt in his mind that the gunshot had not been from her room.

He tried to think of how he was going to explain his presence to her, but his train of thought was continuously disrupted by visions of Elise in all her unclothed glory. His mind was combining them with memories of her in the pool the day he'd fallen in. He pinched his arm hard, trying to wake himself up. He knew he had to explain. And apologise. He hated apologies. There was no way he was going to do it face-to-face. He was thoroughly embarrassed and he doubted she wanted to see him. Also at this point in time, his visions of her were causing another problem.

Finally coming to a decision, he called her room from the hotel phone. Elise was surprised to hear the
"Miss Bennet," she heard a deep voice at the other end.

"Yes?" She had initially thought it was the concierge, but the voice sounded familiar.

"About earlier," Elise quickly realised who was calling, and her face heated up as she listened. "Look, I heard a gunshot. It's my job to protect you. I was sure it was from your room, so I had to come in. It's my job."

Darcy was growing flustered. Apologies were not his style, and he was realising that this one wasn't going so well. He was hoping for her to jump in soon. Lucky for him, Elise had pieced together what had happened, realising that he had heard the sound from her TV and that the uncomfortable situation they had been in earlier was not his fault.

"Yeah it's fine. You were right, there was a gunshot noise from my room, but it was just the TV, no big deal," she tried to brush off the situation quickly, her discomfort growing.

"Oh. Well, my apologies Miss Bennet, I uh… I didn't know." Darcy still felt obligated to apologise but he was incredibly uncomfortable and the words fell lamely from him.

Elise snorted, her unease causing her to deflect the situation with humour. "You've seen me naked, I think you can cut the Miss Bennet crap. It's Elise."

"Yes, uh. Okay, then."

Elise had not entirely forgiven him. Although she knew his misinterpretation of the gunshot was not his fault, she recalled that he had stood there staring for a considerable time period. That, combined with his unconvincing apology and the fact that he had not offered her his first name, meant that in her books, he was still an asshole.

"Okay, then. Good night, Darcy," she said, not waiting for a response before she hung up.

At 1 am, Darcy was tossing and turning in bed. He was unable to sleep and his mind kept drifting to the woman who slept on the other side of a single door. The hotel phone suddenly rang, and Darcy, lost in his thoughts, answered quickly, thinking it was Elise.

"Willy!" came an excited squeal from the other end of the line.

Darcy had to bite his tongue to keep himself from swearing out loud in frustration. "Hi Carrie," he responded, unenthusiastically.

He had met Carrie Bingley for the first time when he'd gone on vacation with Charlie's family several years ago. The entire holiday she had spent batting her eyelashes at him and holding on to his arm for whatever reason she could come up with. At first Darcy had assumed it to be a summer crush, but he became nervous when she continuously poked him on Facebook, liked all photos of him, and continuously sent him messages asking if he was 'free any time soon'.

"Oh! It's so sweet that you recognise my voice!" she exclaimed, sounding really excited.

"Uh, not really. It's just nobody else calls me Wi- uh…. that." Darcy couldn't bring himself to refer to himself as Willy. He wasn't even sure how she'd found out his first name

"Oh! It's so sweet that I have a special pet name for you!" she responded, her excitement not
diminished in the least.

"Uh, I guess."

"So Willy, I was actually calling to see if you wanted to hang out right now!"

"Actually, I'm in bed right now, Carrie."

"Oh no! You were? Oopsies! Well since, you're awake now, I could always come up there and keep you company!"

"That's okay, I think I'll just go to sleep…"

"Well, ok then, but if you can't hang out tonight, we should definitely do something together tomorrow!"

"Carrie, the thing is, I'm Miss Bennet's body guard and I have to-"

"Oh, I'm sure she can spare you for a little while! She must be such a sweet girl. I mean Francissa Bennet's clothes seem so down-to-earth but also so unique and awesome! I'm sure she and her family are that way too! You know what, I don't even mind if the three of us all hang out together! Although me and you definitely need to chat one-on-one as well."

"Listen Carrie, I need to sleep now and tomorrow is going to be really busy for me… but maybe we can do something… someday?" Darcy tried to appease her so that he could end the call, but in his mind, someday was in some other lifetime. There was nothing in particular wrong with Carrie Bingley, other than her taste for expensive clothes in obscene colours, shades of orange especially. Darcy just couldn't stand her. And what was most unfortunate was that she couldn't seem to take the hint.

"Oh, okay, sure. Sweet dreams, Willy," she said, lowering her voice to what Darcy assumed was supposed to be a seductive tone. He quickly hung up, lay back on his pillow and hoped that she would not feature in his dreams before promptly falling asleep.

At 3am Elise was in the middle of a vivid dream. She was in a laboratory working with a bright blue liquid when suddenly Darcy materialised in front of her. He shot her on the right side of her chest, and as she fell to the floor she shouted "Ha! You got the wrong side! My heart is on the other side!" All of a sudden, the CSI theme tune started to play and the cast of CSI Miami materialised in front of her, with a second Darcy, this one dressed in a black coat with small black glasses. This Darcy leaned forward and plucked the bullet from her chest. She was just about to scream at him that she would bleed out, when a phone started ringing.

Elise slowly drifted into consciousness. She could hear her ringtone playing and she reached over on to the nightstand to grab the phone, briefly casting her eye over the clock and noting the time.

"Hullo?" she said, her voice slightly hoarse.

"EHH-LEEEE!" she heard the shrill voice of her youngest stepsister in response.

"Lyssa? Whas happening?" she mumbled, still groggy.

"Ellie, I invited some of my friends over and Mom is in San Francisco and Mars and Cari are being sucky so can some of them stay in your room? Please, please, please!"
"Can't they stay in your room? Or the den?"

"They are, but there's not enough spaces. Please Ellie!"

Elise, half-asleep and desperate to shut her sister up, mumbled her agreement and Alyssa quickly hung up, shouting "In here, guys!" Elise drifted back to sleep almost immediately.

When she woke up several hours later, Elise vaguely remembered speaking to Alyssa but had no recollection of the content of their conversation.

On their second day in San Diego, Elise and Darcy walked from apartment to apartment, checking each place out and leaving dissatisfied. Conversation was much more stilted between them. Elise was still very much aggravated by his haughtiness. It worsened when in each apartment he diligently pointed out flaws both to her and to the realtor, complaining about scratches in the paintwork, thin walls, small rooms and so on.

"He's not even going to be living here!" she thought. Each time he made a comment she'd squint at him. He never seemed to notice the withering looks she was shooting him and would continue with his stream of complaints.

What aggravated Elise the most was that he was right. All of the flaws he pointed out were legitimate, and would irritate her were she to live in any of the apartments they had seen.

Darcy was uncomfortable in her presence. He could not bring himself to make eye contact with her and as a result he found him gazing at the floor, the ceilings and the walls of every apartment she considered. In doing this he was able to discover numerous issues with each apartment they saw. He did not hesitate to point them out. In his mind, his observations were welcome. He was even more inclined to point out flaws when these remarks were able to penetrate the somewhat awkward silence between Elise and himself.

When they had finished seeing the last of eleven apartments, Elise and Darcy walked back to the hotel in strained silence. As they entered their rooms, she told him she would be having dinner in and she bid him goodnight. After the considerable amount of walking they had done, Darcy was hungry. He decided to order from the over-priced room service. He contemplated asking Elise to join him for dinner. In fact, he walked to the connecting door and opened it from his side, before deciding he couldn't face her. He turned away without even closing the door.

After ordering a club sandwich and coke, Darcy went to the bathroom to freshen up. He returned to the room and sent a quick text to Bingley asking what time he and Jenine expected to arrive the next day. He had just pressed the send button when he heard a knock at his room door. He assumed it was his dinner and rose to open the door. However when he opened the door, he did not find the server with the table trolley as he expected, but merely the table trolley alone.

"Odd," he thought to himself. He was too hungry to think much further on it and quickly went about wheeling his meal into his room. He was surprised at how heavy the trolley was as well, considering all that was on it. Once he had situated the trolley at the foot of his bed, he turned to close his room door. When he turned back around he saw a head of red hair pop out from under the tablecloth and he shrieked loudly and continuously in horror his panic increasing at the realisation that his handgun was in his bedside drawer, and the table was obstructing his path towards it.

Elise, who had just tucked into her meal, heard Darcy's shriek with surprise. There was no doubt in her mind that it was Darcy shrieking, his voice familiar, and the sound very clearly coming from next
door. She looked for a weapon, grabbing her TV remote, which looked like the most dangerous thing in her room. She yanked her side of the connecting door open and found herself in Darcy's room. The scene before her eyes made no sense. Darcy was standing leaned back against his room door with a look of horror on his face. Standing in front of a table of food was a scantily clad Carrie Bingley, dressed in extremely provocative orange feathery lingerie.

"What the fuck, Darcy?" Elise demanded.

"She… she was in my food!" he exclaimed gesturing at Carrie.

Elise glanced at Carrie, who winked at her.

"Oh… am interrupting something?" Elise had absolutely no idea what was going on and moved to back out of the room.

"What? No!" Darcy hollered, unwilling to be left alone with Carrie. "Didn't you just say you needed me for something?" he asked Elise, quickly regaining his senses. Elise opened her mouth to answer but Darcy did not give her a chance to speak. "That's right! You did! You said we had something important to work on! I'm so sorry Carrie, you can't stay," he grabbed her by the arm, "you know security and all that." He quickly whisked her to the door and before she had a chance to fight back, he flung it open, pushed her outside, slammed it shut and fastened the chain.

"Phew!" he side with relief, leaning against the door.

"I'll come back later, Willy!" he heard Carrie announce from the hallway.

His eyes popped at the prospect.

"What the fuck just happened, Darcy?" Elise demanded once more.

"I don't know! I ordered food and she was on my tray!"

"Why did you scream, though? You're a bodyguard! You have a gun!"

"Did you see what she was wearing? And I couldn't reach my gun!"

"Darcy, even if you didn't have your gun you could totally take her! And she didn't look like she was going to attack you anyway."

"I thought she was a giant bird, okay!" he shouted.

"Um… okay?" Elise was still in the dark. She was pretty sure Darcy could take on a giant bird, she'd seen his muscles.

"I have ornithophobia!" he announced, flustered, "and anyway, did you think you were going to save me from an attacker with a TV remote? I'm the bodyguard. If someone attacks you go hide and I'll fight them off! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking, 'why the fuck is my bodyguard screaming like a girl'?"

"I just told you! I thought she was a giant bird!"

Elise recalled the vision of Carrie in her orange feathery lingerie and snorted. "She did really look like a bird!" she laughed. Her laughter soon escalated into full on hysteria as she envisioned Darcy being attacked by a giant orange bird.
Darcy, at first, sat there gaping at Elise as she laughed until she collapsed onto his room floor.

"I'm just picturing her… pecking you!" Elise struggled to breath she was laughing so hard. Her laughter soon caught on, and although he wasn't entirely convinced of the humour in the situation, Darcy joined in her laughter.

After several minutes they grew too tired to laugh. Darcy clutching his back and Elise her stomach, they looked up at each other and smiled warmly.

Darcy cleared his throat. "Did you maybe want to have the rest of your dinner with me?" He asked, motioning to his table trolley and the food on it, which had somehow survived the ordeal, unscathed.

"Yeah, sure, I just… I laughed too much and I really need to pee!" Elise responded quickly before rushing to her bathroom. Darcy chuckled but the sides of his face were in too much pain for a sustained laugh. He quickly brought her table trolley into his room, wheeling it beside his own.

She returned and sat beside him. Throughout their meal, Elise was assaulted by visions of Carrie as a bird, resulting in her having numerous giggling fits. Darcy kept eying his food suspiciously, inspecting it carefully in case it had been tampered with. He refused outright to drink his coke. Overall, the entire time was passed with silliness. Darcy, nervous that Carrie was waiting outside for him, made Elise push both table trolleys out her room door. He demanded that she latch the door as well.

Elise lay in bed that night with a smile on her face. Darcy was considerably less smiley as he lay there, paranoid that either Carrie Bingley or a large bird would find their way into his room.
On Saturday morning Elise lay in her hotel room bed staring at the ceiling. She had awoken certain that the previous night of Darcy and Carrie Bingley had been a vivid dream, but slowly realised that it was, in fact, reality. She wondered briefly how her bird-fearing bodyguard was faring.

Darcy woke up in a foul mood. His sleep had been interrupted several times during the night by the phone ringing. The one time he'd actually answered, nobody had spoken and he had listened to the eerie noises of heavy breathing of a couple of minutes before hanging up. When it had happened two times afterwards, he'd finally unplugged the phone. He was doubly annoyed because Elise had told him they had no early appointments that morning but his traitorous body had awoken at 7am anyway and his hopes of a lie-in were dashed.

As a result, when at 11am Elise knocked at his door so that they could head over to another apartment viewing together, he slammed the door behind him and strode briskly in front of her to the lifts.

"Did you have a good sleep?" Elise asked tentatively.

The scowl she received in response was so intense that she determined that no line of conversation would be appropriate this morning considering her companion's mood. At the viewing, for the first time, Darcy did not pepper the estate agent with probing questions. Instead he glowered at her so severely that the woman cowered in her kitten heels and stammered through the numerous advantages of the flat they were looking at.

Whether it was because of Darcy's intimidating stare or the qualities of the apartment itself, the estate agent's sales pitch did not convince Elise in the slightest. Her frustration at not finding an apartment that suited her needs was growing and somehow her enthusiasm about her medical school offer was waning. She was unsure if it was simply because the novelty of receiving an offer was fading or if it was actually that she couldn't find a place she liked. Elise was eager for Jen's arrival as she knew her calm and sensible sister would be able to talk some sense into her and reassure her.

Bingley and Jen had texted to inform Darcy and Elise of their imminent arrival at some point around lunchtime. After the first viewing Elise and Darcy saw two more flats. However, by the end of the third flat viewing, Elise's nerves were wearing thin and she decided to call it a day. Anxious to see Jen, who had texted to say that she and Charlie were headed to the hotel, Elise demanded that she and Darcy return to meet them there. When they walked through the lobby, Elise was hoping that Jen and Bingley had decided not to leave for lunch and that she could speak to her sister as soon as possible. She desperately needed Jen's calm vibes.

Elise and Darcy walked into the lobby and stood waiting for a lift to arrive. When the doors opened the pair were pleasantly surprised to see the flushed faces of Bingley and Jen.

"Jennie!" Elise exclaimed flinging herself into her big sisters arms. "I'm so glad you're here. Was the road ok? How was your interview?"

"Yeah, my interview seemed fine, but I guess I'll find out pretty soon if it actually was. The road was... nice," Jen responded slightly hesitantly, flushing.

"Nice?" Elise eyed her sister suspiciously. "Since when are car journeys nice?" She shrugged Jen's comment off as she realised that she would be able to pry an explanation out of Jen as soon as they
were alone.

Darcy clapped his friend on the back and quirked his eyebrow at Jen's description of the car ride. Bingley's face heated and Darcy smirked wiggling his eyebrows. Bingley tried to give him a menacing scowl, but his generally pleasant expression thwarted that plan. In fact, instead of feeling threatened, Darcy broke out in a grin. The interaction between the two men went unnoticed by the sisters as Elise vented her frustrations to Jen.

"It's just driving me nuts, Jennie! We've seen so many apartments the past two days but there's always a problem. One had no furniture; another was in a dodgy area. Then there was one where kitchen can only hold one person at a time. The best yet was the flat where there's no bathroom door! It's not like I even have that many conditions that need meeting!

"My price range is obviously pretty flexible- Daddy's not keen on me moving but he wouldn't take issue with me buying some luxurious 10 bedroom penthouse. I just want a place close to the medical school with decent facilities. I'll pay freaking extra if I have to but that's all I'm asking for!" Elise stomped her foot for effect.

Jen put her arm around her sister's shoulders. "Ellie you're getting too stressed out for no reason, bubs. First of all you haven't even heard from all your Med Schools yet! You're not even a hundred per cent sure you're moving here. Secondly, this trip was made so you could scope the place out. It was supposed to be fun!

"We never expected you to find an apartment immediately. Especially when you're not even sure you want one. I think you've done enough apartment hunting, Ellie. You need to de-stress. We are going to do something fun the rest of today!"

Elise hugged her sister. "Thanks, Jennie. I really needed that talk."

"No problem bubs. Let's get us some lunch and then go have some fun!"

They ended up going to the burger place Elise and Darcy had visited on their first day in San Diego. This time, Darcy ordered a salmon teriyaki burger, causing Elise to snort in a un-lady-like manner as he placed his order. Elise decided to try out a grilled tuna burger instead of ordering the same. Jen and Bingley ended up ordering the same meal. Conversation flowed mostly between Jen and Elise, with the occasional interjection from Bingley. Darcy remained largely silent.

It was decided that a trip to the San Diego Zoo was in order. The girls came up with the idea and the guys were in agreement, although even if they had not been, Elise and Jen were so exuberant that they would have been forced to go anyway.

They bought their passes and squeezed in the barriers amongst the numerous children spending Saturday at the zoo with their parents. Elise squealed as she saw the big cats, proclaiming excitedly that she wanted to 'squish them'.

Jen and Bingley walked side by side the majority of the time, their hands lightly brushing but yet not joined. At one of the stalls, Bingley knocked the stack of cans down thrice and won a massive stuffed giraffe Jen had been eyeing. He presented it to her bashfully and she proceeded to kiss his cheek in thanks, causing him to blush and run his hand through his rust-coloured hair. The giraffe was so large that in time Jen grew tired of lugging it around and Bingley chivalrously offered to hold on to it for her. She kissed his cheek once more, and the animal was dumped on Bingley for the rest of the time.
As they walked around, Darcy spotted a stall selling waffle fries and he bought some whilst everyone else claimed they were not hungry. Elise couldn't resist stealing one from him, and gosh those things were addictive potatoey goodness. She ended up eating about half of them while Darcy looked on amused.

By the time they'd seen the pandas, Jen was reaching for Bingley's hand while he manoeuvred the giraffe so that he could hold hers. When they arrived at the aviary, Darcy tried to convince his charge that it wasn't worth seeing, making remarks such as 'they're probably all asleep anyway' and 'it's too hot, they'll probably be hiding', but there was absolutely no way Elise was going to miss seeing any part of the zoo. She rolled her eyes at him good-naturedly and grabbed his wrist.

"Don't worry Darcy, I'll protect you from the big mean birdies!" she ribbed. He scowled intensely.

Funnily enough, once she let go of his hand to go look at the macaws, he quickly followed her, grabbing on to her arm. She let out a laugh and offered him the crook of her elbow to place his hand in, and then proceeded to lead him around. She only stopped for short periods in an attempt to minimise his misery. They arrived at the lorikeet feeding cage and Elise sarcastically asked Darcy if he was interested in feeding them. He glared at her and muttered something that sounded like "I'd rather wipe my ass with those $3." Elise giggled and decided to spare him, navigating them towards the monkeys.

When they were finishing up their day at the flamingo enclosure, Darcy's fingers tightened around her arm. She looked up at him in question and he whispered "Carrie" in her ear, drawing out the syllables to make the name sound more eerie. Elise's wide eyes caused him to guffaw loudly and she soon joined in his amusement, bursting out in giggles. Their laughter caused Jen and Bingley to shift their focus from each other for the first time, and they looked on in shock at the laughing pair. Both were very much surprised at Elise and Darcy's camaraderie, especially after hearing their rants about each other.

Dinner that evening was a pleasant affair. Worn out after hours at the zoo, none of the party could be bothered with anything other than a relaxed, casual evening. They opted to have an Italian meal at a quiet and informal restaurant. Conversation flowed easily, everybody contributing and the group learning more about each individual.

Elise asked the men how long they'd worked together and was surprised to hear that Darcy had only just joined the company. She found this strange as Darcy and Bingley seemed to share an easy-going camaraderie, indicative of a longtime friendship. She said as much to the men. Bingley explained that they had known each since their teenage years and had in fact worked together at a previous job. Her curiosity was piqued by his vague statement about their last employment.

"Oh, so you guys have worked as bodyguards for a long time?" she asked, in attempt to get one of them to reveal more. Jen caught on to her ploy and squinted at her sister.

"Uh, not that long. So what was the job you were doing in England?" he changed the subject, eyeing Darcy somewhat nervously.

Elise noticed the way he skirted around the issue, but chose not to press it as she had taken a liking to Bingley's affable personality and did not want to make him uncomfortable.

"Well, one of the professors I'd had as an undergrad was publishing a paper with a London university. I'd gotten to know her quite well since I'd done some summer projects with her. I wanted the research experience and I also felt like it would strengthen my med school application since I hadn't majored in a medical related field for undergrad. Since we had a pretty good rapport, my
professor was happy to have me on the team researching with her so I ended up across the pond."

"That's really great! What did you major in for undergrad?"

"International Trade. Minored in Neurobiology."

"Wow, that major is so different to medicine! How come..." Charlie trailed off as he saw Jen trying to subtly shake her head at him.

"My dad thinks the career path I've chosen is pointless," Elise responded vehemently. "He wants Jen and me to 'continue the legacy he started for us' and 'use the better opportunities he has provided'," she said accentuating her rant with air quotes. "He basically gave me an ultimatum. I had to pick a degree he approved of if I wanted him to pay for my degree. So I caved and did what he wanted."

"Lizzy," Jen admonished, uncomfortable with the light she was painting their father in.

"No Jen, you know very well that's what happened. You never had it as bad as me anyway. For you he was just 'suggesting' that you do a degree that would help you run the company, but in the end he wasn't going to push it because you're not the lucky one he wants to follow in his footsteps," she argued sarcastically.

Jenine smiled apologetically at Darcy and Bingley. With her reserved nature, she was somewhat annoyed at Elise for airing their dirty laundry in front of their company. She understood, though, that this had been bothering Elsie particularly of late, especially since their father was blatantly ignoring Elise's decision to go to medical school. As much as she didn't like to point out the flaws in others, she couldn't deny that David Bennet took ostrich to a new level, burying his head in the sand as deeply as possible.

"Anyway, thankfully things have worked out now, and Ellie has an offer from medical school!" Jen stated with a fake smile, trying to diffuse the tense atmosphere somewhat.

"Yeah, that's great! And it must have been really helpful that you spent this past year doing research in London. Hey Darce, isn't some of your family from over there?" Charlie added, trying to help Jen with her cause.


"Oh, so do you travel over there at all?" Elise asked, deciding her rant was best left for another time and for other company.

"Well, we didn't much as kids, but my sister decided she wanted to move there recently and now she lives in my mother's family's ancestral home. I go over when I have holidays."

"That must be really pleasant. So you've just got one sister then?" Jen asked Darcy, smiling.

"Yes."

Elise noticed the way his jaw tightened infinitesimally with his curt response and chose to move the discussion away from him in the interests of calm conversation. "Charlie, how about you? Any siblings?"

"Nope, I'm an only child," he replied, pouting comically.

"But you're not bratty at all!" Elise exclaimed jokingly.
"Oh, but I can be. I don't share. Especially food." He guarded his plate from the rest of them and made what must have been an attempt at a menacing face. They all laughed pleasantly at his funny expression. "I suppose I have quite a sibling-like relationship with my cousins. You met Carrie at the hotel, and there's her sister Eloise. She lives back on the east coast. But to be honest, we never lived close by and I never spent enough time with them as a kid to call them sisters. Darce here is probably the closest thing I have to a sibling."

"Must have been really different for you girls than it was for us, growing up with a big family and all?" Darcy asked.

"Well, yes and no. For a long time it was just me and Jen. Fran and her girls joined the family when we were already teenagers. I guess we got to experience living in both a small family and a big family. I mean when we lived with our mom, it was just us three girls, so that really was a small family."

"Wait so… Mrs. Bennet… Fran…she-" Darcy started, confusion etched on his face.

"She's our stepmother. And Marissa, Carissa and Alyssa are our stepsisters," Elise finished for him.

"Oooh." Darcy said slowly.

"Dude, you didn't know?" Bingley was surprised that Darcy had neither realised nor been told this tidbit.

"Uh, no. I just figured Mrs. Bennet was you guys' mom. So your actual mom, she…uh…uh…"

Darcy suddenly realised this was not the best path to proceed on if their mother had passed away.

"Relax, Darcy," Elise instructed, realising the path his mind was on, "Mom is very much alive. She's just off the radar. Somewhere in Ecuador I think."

"Mom's a travel writer," Jen explained to the guys. "Actually Ellie, I got an email from Edouard saying he and mom would be in Paris in a couple of days, so that might be a good time to give her a call."

"Edouard is our stepfather as of, oh, about four years now. He's actually a photographer for National Geographic, so him and mom are travelling a lot. He's a really cool guy," Elise elaborated for Bingley and Darcy's benefit.

"It's fantastic that you girls have good relationships with your stepparents. I think Cinderella put a downer on all step-family members for me and I've always felt like friction within joint families would be normal." Charles blushed slightly at the nudge he received from Darcy when he admitted his knowledge of Cinderella.

"Not for us I guess, although to be honest Jen and I weren't very young when our parents remarried. They'd been split up for years before either of them did anyway, so it never felt like either Fran or Ed was tearing our family apart. Ed's really lovely, I think he's almost like a cool uncle for us. And Fran certainly isn't an evil stepmother. She's always looked after us alongside her own daughters and, although I wouldn't say we have a close relationship with her, she does show us her love in her own way."

"It's great to have family, in any shape or form," Charles stated pleasantly, receiving nodding assent from the rest of the party.

The rest of the evening went smoothly and it was not long until the next morning, when Elise and
Darcy found themselves back in Betty the Beetle, ready to set off back to Los Angeles. Jen needed to drive her car back and Bingley, in the name of duty, of course, rode back in her passenger seat. Darcy loaded both his and Elise's duffles into Betty's boot and climbed into the car, squashing his large form into the passenger seat, as he had on the way there.

The Sunday morning was still warm, but nowhere near as stifling as the weather had been on their previous journey on Thursday. The traffic, though present, was less of a force to be reckoned with as well. Betty was soon speeding along the motorway. Elise pushed in a cassette tape to play for the duration of their drive.

*You look like an angel*

*Walk like an angel*

*Talk like an angel*

*But I got wise*

*You're the devil in disguise*

*Oh yes you are*

The song blared from the radio and Darcy eyed Elise quizzically. "Elvis?"

"Yup. You got a problem with that?"

He chuckled. "No, not at all. Who doesn't love 'The King'?"

"Exactly."

After that song, the tape played on and the pair soon found themselves singing along to The Rolling Stone's 'Satisfaction' and Leslie Gore's 'It's My Party', although Darcy claimed to hate the latter. A couple of songs later, The Beatles were sounding out through the car.

"Well I'm shaking a baby, shaking a baby!" Elise sang loudly as she drove.

"Did you just say 'I'm shaking a baby'?"

"Yup."

"That is most definitely not what he's singing."

"Mhmm."

Unsure of whether this was a sound of agreement or not, Darcy went on, "I think you'll find the lyrics are actually 'shake it up baby'."

"I know."

"Then why were you 'shaking a baby'?"

"I used to think it was that. And anyways, I like those lyrics better. More entertaining."

"More ridiculous, more like it," Darcy muttered.

"You say ridiculous, I say tomato."
Elise continued to sing the lyrics her way and it wasn't long before Darcy joined in on the ridiculousness. The next song was 'Surfin' USA' and they both sang at the top of their voices. Elise managed to include some of her very own lyrics in that song too.

"Is this by any chance a 60's tape?"

"It is indeed!" Elise confirmed for Darcy.

"It's amazing. I'd ask you to make a copy for me, but I don't have anything that plays tapes," he sniggered causing Elise to glare, before joining in with giggles.

Elise climbed up the stairs back at the Bennet home with her duffle bag slung over her shoulder gently humming Simon and Garfunkel. She stood a few stairs up and waved at Jen and Bingley who entered the front door. Bingley was carrying Jen's bag in for her. Elise bit back the urge to run up to them and pinch their cheeks for being cute and sweet and huggable. She trudged up the stairs and opened the door to her bedroom. At the sight she was met with, Elise's eyes filled with tears.
Elise clenched her fists tightly. Hot, angry tears streamed down her face as she surveyed the damage before her. She tried to restrain the urge but in her frustration she let out a loud scream, which ended as a growl. The sound reverberated through the house.

The back wall of Elise's room had on it a set of grass green shelves arranged in the shape of an 'E'. These shelves were home to her most prized possessions. The three long horizontal shelves, making the branches of the letter, were filled with her favourite books- a great many novels, some of her mother's writing, a couple of photo albums. In the arrangement of shelves, the long vertical backbone of the letter 'E' was made of 2 short horizontal shelves one above the other, between each of the long book-filled ones.

Elise, like many people, had a hobby collecting items. In her case, she had procured snow globes from every city she had visited in her lifetime. Once collecting snow globes had become her 'thing', her family helped enable her collection. Where possible, Elise's mother would procure her snow globes from her various travel destinations. In fact, when Jen had unpacked on her return from China, she had handed her sister an item covered in layers of bubble wrap. Before popping the bubbles (for a good 20 minutes at least), Elise had unraveled the bubble wrap to find a beautifully crafted globe with the glass encasing a miniature Great Wall.

All of the snow globes were special to her, none more so than the one she had received on her 3rd birthday from her father (who had never been particularly good at buying his daughters age appropriate gifts). It was larger than most of the others and had been specially commissioned by him. Trapped within the glass and surrounded by little white spheres was a family. A woman with long brown hair held the hand of a small blond girl whose other hand grasped that of a little brunette girl, who in turn, held the hand of a tall blond man. When, at numerous points in her life, Elise had struggled with the strange nature of her family and the absence of her mother or father, she would shake the globe and allow the snow to settle along with her frustration.

With each new acquisition that she made, Elise would carefully place the item on one of the short shelves, and arrange all the globes so that none was hidden. So pernickety was she about these snow globes, that Elise would not allow Hilary, the Bennet family's housekeeper, to dust her shelves when she cleaned the room.

So, when Elise walked into her room to find that the top shelf of the 'E' had collapsed and fallen atop the lower shelves thus causing severe damage to her snow globe collection, it was only natural for her to go postal. She knew that the shelves were well constructed and sturdy having held up for almost a decade, and thus, nothing short of a natural disaster would have caused the shelf to fall on its own. This meant that someone was to blame. Blame would be perfect, as in her blind rage Elise was looking for anyone to inflict her wrath on.

Jen, who had heard Elise's roar downstairs rushed upstairs, knowing that the Bennet household was likely to be the set of a tantrum the likes of which had not been seen since her sister's teenage days. She found her sister still in the doorway of her room, fists clenched, cheeks flushed and hot tears spilling from her eyes. A quick glance around the room told Jen the source of her sister's rage and she knew there would be hell to pay. She feared for the safety of Hilary. Worried for her own safety, Jen decided against enclosing her sister in a hug and chose to instead place a hand against her upper back.

Elise turned to face her sister, tears now spilling onto her cheeks in bucket-loads. "MY SNOW GLOBES!" she howled in anguish. "How did this happen? I just… I can't even get them back! I'm
just… I'm going to kill her!"

"Ellie, honey-" Jen began, ready to assure her sister that Hilary could not be to blame and more importantly to remind her that this must have been an accident, before Alyssa's voice interrupted.

"Oh my gosh! Is it a lizard?"

At this point Elise had run over to the back wall and squatting on the floor surveying the remains of her collection while she cried. Jen knew she had to get rid of Alyssa before trying to calm Elise down.

"What are you talking about, Alyssa?"

"All this racket. Is there a lizard or a bug or something?"

"No, no, no, no, nooo," Elise wailed as she saw the irreparable damage to her most precious snow globe. The glass was largely smashed, a few jagged edges still rising out of the base. Three of the figures in the globe had been decapitated whilst the last one had been knocked down and cut off at the knees.

"What's her problem?" Alyssa asked Jen. "Hey Elise, can you stop-" What was likely to be the perfect statement to cause Elise to attack her was halted by Jen making 'off with your head' gestures.

"What? She found a dead lizard in her room?"

'No Alyssa, there's no freaking lizard!"

"Um, ok then. Oh hey Ellie, I'm really sorry about your shelves."

Elise's head whipped around. "What?" she demanded harshly.

"Yeah, I mean I had no idea the guys would do that. I told Hilary not to clean your room because I thought you might be able to fix some of your stuff when you got back and I know how picky you are about her cleaning them."

"You broke my snow globes?"

"Not me, the boys. You know how you let me use your room for some of my friends to sleep in? Well apparently after I was asleep the boys had some kind of wrestling match- which I am totally annoyed that I missed out on… yum yum- and they accidentally- AAH!"

Elise, with uncharacteristic cat-like agility leapt across the bed to where Alyssa was standing and lunged at her. Thankfully for the younger girl, Jen had been prepared and quickly held Elise back, but not before she managed to scratch Alyssa.

"What the hell, Ellie?" Alyssa screeched alerting the rest of the household to the ongoing drama.

"What the hell, Ellie? WHAT THE HELL, ALYSSA? First of all, if you ask a favour from someone and you're using their stuff, you're supposed to take care of it! You should have made sure your punkass friends wouldn't damage any of my shit! And then, if something does happen, you're supposed to tell the person and just APOLOGISE!"

"I did apologise! You scratched me!"

"Girls, what is going on?" Fran Bennet's voice interrupted the shouting match.
"Mom, she scratched me!" Alyssa whined.

"Yeah, well she damaged my property!" Elise accused, waving in the general direction of where her shelves were.

"I raised you girls better than this screeching! Stop this at once, it's going to give me frown lines! Elise, honey, this is not the end of the world. You've outgrown snow globes anyways. It's about time you started thinking of properly growing up and settling down. Stop these childish tendencies. Which reminds me, I have someone I'd like you to meet coming over for dinner!" Fran announced, looking extremely pleased with herself.

Elise looked mind-boggled at her stepmother, and Alyssa used the interlude of silence to storm off.

"Ugh, forget it. You can all just leave me alone. I'll clean up the remains of my 'childish tendencies'."

"Okay, honey! Dress up nice for dinner!" Fran called out as she flounced off, feeling pleased with herself for her handling of the situation.

"Ellie, can I help you at all?" Jen asked tentatively.

"No, it's fine. I'll do this by myself," she sighed and a lone tear rolled down her cheek.

"Okay bubs, if you're sure. Ellie, I will bring you another one back from China and I know mom would be happy to get you lots more from her trips. I know they won't be the same…"

"Thanks, Jen. That would be great. It just, you know. I mean I loved having a big collection, but it was mostly all the memories and stuff. I just- I don't know… nostalgia? Feelings? I'll get over it." She plastered a smile on her face.

Not in the least bit convinced by her sister's attempt at levity, Jen gave her a sympathetic smile before retreating.

Elise quickly tied up the end of her fishtail braid and glanced in the mirror briefly before rushing off to answer the door. Unsure of who was arriving for dinner this evening she had dressed smartly, in a long sleeveless white dress. It was plainly cut and she had brightened it with a turquoise cardigan and a pair of seashell button earrings. She had used a considerable amount of make up on her eyes, trying to hide the signs of the crying she had done earlier.

Once Jen had left, Elise had swept up the shattered remains of the globes. She had gingerly picked out salvageable pieces from the debris. She had the Eiffel tower, part of the great wall and some of Niagara falls set aside. Although she knew it couldn't be fixed, she had saved as much as she could from her favourite snow globe, the heads and bodies of her miniature figures also kept aside. She had placed these pieces gently into a small box in the top drawer of her dresser, in which she had the stubs of theatre tickets and ballet tickets, as well as small black and white photographs of her grandparents and great grandparents. She had shed a few more tears as she emptied the dustpan into the bin but she knew that even though she had lost her snow globes she still had her memories and numerous photographs and other tidbits. She also knew that Jen and her mother would have no qualms about helping her rebuild her collection.

Elise tucked a couple of loose hairs behind her ear and opened the front door. She looked baffled when she saw J.W. standing in front of her in a well pressed tailored shirt looking particularly dapper.

"Um, hi?"
"Hey Els. You look surprised to see me."

"Um yeah, Fran said she had someone special she wanted me to meet at dinner. I thought she knew we'd already met. Like a decade ago. And you're not all that special," she grinned.

"She was at our place over the weekend and she said I was invited to dinner today. I figured it was you, me, Jen and Carla, but before I left Carla said she hadn't been told anything about dinner at yours. She also said to tell you you're a bitch for inviting me and not her. I'm totally fine with it though, I always knew I was your favourite Lucas."

"Of course you are," she responded patronisingly. "I seriously had no idea you were our dinner company. If I'd known I wouldn't be wearing this dress."

"Oooh!" J.W. wiggled his eyebrows. "Somebody's dressed to impress, then?"

"You couldn't tell?" Elise whined with mock offense. "Nah, not really, I decided to go with an outfit that would be appropriate for work or a date or a picnic or any awkward social situation."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'versatile'."

"Whatever."

"I see that you've matured considerably with the year in England."

She stuck out her tongue at him in response. "What say you, we stop standing awkwardly in the door and go sit in the parlour since apparently Fran has deemed you worthy of a formal dinner party?"

"Sounds good!" Receiving his assent Elise led J.W. into the parlour and they sat down. "Thirsty?"

"Nope."

"Hungry?"

"Well, yeah. But I don't want any of your posh snacks. I'll wait for the real food," he said patting his tummy.

"Speaking of your tummy, what is going on, dude? Where's my scrawny nerd friend gone? Why are you suddenly all muscly?"

"I don't know… I guess I just wanted to be more 'muscly'. Do you think I look better?"

"I would definitely say you were mildly attractive. It confuses me greatly."

"Such great compliments I get from you, Els."

"In all seriousness Jay Dub, I never thought you were unattractive before you bulked up. It's not like you were actually scrawny anyway. You do look great right now though," she smiled. "Really though, what is this about? Are you trying to catch someone in particular's attention?" She wiggled her eyebrows. She had however been entirely unserious and when a slightly guilty expression crossed her friends face, she was taken by surprise. "No way! I'm right? Who is she? Are you actually together? What is going on?"

"Oh gosh, Els! Sit back, for crying out loud. Why are you getting so excited? We never talk about this stuff, this is you and Carla's domain. We talk about bacteria and how agar smells like Horlicks."

"J.W. we never talk about this stuff because the last time you had a girlfriend we were 15. She had
big boobs and you did her homework."

"Melania Frasier! I had forgotten about her. Did you know she moved to Florida?"

"I had no idea. Thanks so much for that useful tidbit. Now back to the subject you tried so cleverly to avoid! Who is your girlfriend?"

"Ok first of all, this girl is not my girlfriend."

"Your mistress, then?"

"Shut up. No, she's not 'my' anything. I just, you know, like her and stuff."

"Do I know her?"

"I'm not sure how well you know her," Jun Wei responded. He was hesitant to lie outright, but this answer could be left open to numerous interpretations.

"Oh, smooth. A vague answer but no lie told."

"Thanks."

"Does she like you too?"

"I don't know. I mean I've known her for a long time. Lately, I feel like our relationship is changing and we're not exactly 'just friends' anymore, but I'm not sure if that's purely imagined on my side."

"Why don't you say something to her?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I don't want to ruin a perfectly good friendship and make things awkward for a lot of people?"

"But you don't know for sure that that will happen."

"But I don't know for sure that it won't."

"I guess what you have to decide is whether or not you think the outcome of the relationship is worth risking your friendship over."

"I think… I think I need to think some more."

Elise laughed lightly, "You do that." They smiled at each other pleasantly, but the ringing of the doorbell interrupted their moment. Elise sat upright listening for the footsteps of either Fran or Jen, but she heard nothing. She shrugged her shoulders, "I guess nobody else is ready. I'll get it. Sit tight."

She slowly opened the front door, wondering hopefully if their other guest was Carla. She opened the door and was taken aback by the wide closed-mouth smile she received from the man standing on her doorstep. She stepped back a little and looked down at him, because the individual standing in front of her could not be described as anything other than short. At her not very tall height of 5'3", Elise stood at least couple of inches above the man. She ignored the serial killer smile he donned and studied his attire. He wore a forest green dinner jacket paired with navy blue trousers a little too long for him. His hands were clasped together in front of him. He had long fingernails that made her shudder slightly. His fingers were adorned with a multitude of rings containing garishly large gemstones. She realized she'd been staring and she quickly snapped back to attention.
"Um, hi?"

"Elise Bennet," the strange man's smile broadened and his knowledge of her full name unnerved Elise. "I am delighted to meet you at last. Francissa has talked so much of you. I have been looking forward to this dinner a great deal."

"Um, thanks? And you are?"

"Oh how silly of me not to introduce myself, I thought you might know who I was. Nicoll Collins," he stated, stretching out his hand.

Elise wearily took it, regretting her decision as soon as he had her hand in his sweaty grasp. "Nicole Collins?"

"No, no, not Nicole. Nicoll."

"Um, okay. Great to meet you Nicoll. Shall we head over to the parlour?"

"That would be positively marvelous."

She directed him inside, and followed him into the parlour. As Nicoll sat down, J.W. gave her a look. He then stuck his hand out at the stranger, not noticing Elise's subtle head-shaking.

"Jun Wei Lucas," J.W. announced as his hand was shaken.

"Nicoll Collins," responded the other man, still clasping J.W.'s hand.

J.W. tilted his head slightly. "Nickel Collins?"

"Nicoll, actually," Collins corrected.

"Nice to meet you," J.W. responded, quickly extracting his hand and trying to discreetly wipe it on one of the sofa cushions, causing Elise to squint her eyes at him.

"So Nicoll, how do you know my stepmother?"

"We are recent acquaintances actually. I happened to be purchasing some items from her boutique," Elise raised her eyebrows knowing her mother only created women's fashion, "while she was checking in on the store. She recognized me, of course, and we started to chat."

"Recognised you? From where?"

"Why, from my show, of course!"

"Your show?"

"Oh, how silly of me. I should have realised that my talk show has yet to go international! You wouldn't have seen it whilst in England! You've heard of 'Nicoll Collins Interviews Famous Personalities in Various Domains', haven't you, Jun Wei?"

J.W. nodded a little too vigorously.

"What a catchy name for your show!" Elise exclaimed, plastering a fake smile on her face. "So tell me, who all have you interviewed so far?"

"Well, some of my more notable interviews have been the one with Michele Bianchi – you know,
the head waiter at Gualtiero's, the Italian restaurant frequented by all the stars- and Aaron Joseph, Oprah's former chauffeur. But the most recent one- yet to be aired- shall be with Coach Cathy Derbug. She is- well of course you know who she is! I've just come back from spending a week in her life, as part of the report! Oh goodness, that woman. She is something else. The commitment she has to her job and her trainees, and the passionate advice she gives, it's astounding! The recommendations she has made for improving my lifestyle! I have been following her regime so carefully the past few days and goodness I feel healthier already!"

Elise eyed his potbelly suspiciously.

Gentle footsteps were heard and soon Jen had joined the party in the parlour. She greeted everyone, introducing herself to Nicoll and sat herself beside her sister. It seemed that Jen was just as out of the loop as J.W. and Elise, as she looked at the individuals with her with a puzzled expression and asked where Carla was. It was clear that nobody, aside from perhaps Nicoll, had any idea what Fran was planning. Conversation continued in a stunted fashion for a time with J.W. asking the girls about their trip to San Diego and occasional off-topic interjections from Nicoll about his show.

It was 9 o'clock when Francissa and David Bennet entered the parlour. Elise was surprised to see her father home at what was an early hour for him. She supposed Fran had called him repeatedly, harassing him until he finally succumbed.

It was clear that there had been a recent disagreement between the married couple, as although they walked in side-by-side, their bodies were turned away from each other and both wore a sour expression. J.W. and Nicoll stood to greet their hosts.

"Francissa! So lovely to see you again! And your home is absolutely beautiful! I am certain I have seen drapes this exact shade of gold in the home of Coach Cathy Derbug. Her tastes are so refined, as are yours, I'm sure," he gushed.

David Bennet rolled his eyes at Nicoll's speech and raised a single eyebrow at Elise, who sported an amused frown. They sat in the parlour a short while and Nicoll dominated the conversation rhapsodising about Coach Cathy. He asked repeatedly about the tennis facilities and the gym on the Bennet property. He suggested that they add a running track as well, because according to Coach Cathy, exercise outdoors was more wholesome.

The party soon moved into the dining room, and took their seats. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet sat at either end of the dining table. Elise was sat opposite Nicoll and Jen opposite J.W., with the girls on the same side.

"Our Elise is very sporty!" Fran announced once everyone was seated comfortably. "She does… what is it that you do again, honey?"

"Um? What sports do I do?" Elise asked, startled from her daydreams.

"Yes, dear."

"I… um… I used to play badminton. Sometimes I go swimming. When I was in 7th grade I was on the netball squad." Somewhat embarrassed at her lack of sporting prowess, Elise quickly tried to list her athletic achievements.

"Coach Cathy says one should partake in at least 6 hours of exercise per week," Nicoll replied condescendingly.

"And how many do you-"
"-Recommend?" Jen quickly cut off her sister's defiant response.

"I try to get at least that much," Nicoll informed the party, "but as I'm sure J.W. can attest to, we young men in the prime of our lives, have such a great deal of energy and we tend to do even more than that minimum."

Mr. Bennet snorted loudly, but then tried to disguise it as a cough, rather pathetically.

Fran decided that the conversation had better move along and decided to ask J.W. a series of questions. She asked about his first year at medical school and the job prospects he was looking at when he graduated. She then proceeded to ask 'what kind of people' his classmates were and about his circle of friends.

"You're still single, then?" she pried, finally getting to the point.

"Um, yes…" J.W. responded nervously, glancing at Elise for help.

"So is Jenine," Fran announced triumphantly, causing both her stepdaughters to look at her wide-eyed.

"Jenine and Jun Wei… it's such a coincidence that both names start with a J! It's almost… fate!"

With the exception of Nicoll, who was nodding in accordance, the rest of the party was staring at Fran completely befuddled.

The rest of the meal passed with Fran encouraging Nicoll to persuade Elise to take up more sporting activities. She went as far as to suggest the pair go to the gym and "get physical together", causing Nicoll to heartily give his assent. Elise tried to disguise her distaste and gave a non-committal answer. Fran's other focus was on J.W. and Jen. She badgered J.W. about his hobbies, desperately looking for anything the pair had in common. When J.W. asked whether the cake served for dessert contained nuts, as he was allergic (a fact which she really should have known after a decade of friendship with his mother), Fran clapped her hands and jumped up.

"You're allergic to nuts? That is so funny!" she exclaimed excitedly. J.W. nodded his head despite his firm belief that anaphylaxis was no laughing matter. "Jenine has a peanut allergy! You two are so alike!"

When at last J.W. announced that he had to leave, causing Nicoll to take his departure as well, Elise waved the two men off from the driveway. She then rushed back inside, letting out a large breath, relieved that the torturous encounter was finally over.

"What was Fran thinking?"
"Soo… you and Jenine, huh?" Darcy said to Bingley one evening, as he shuffled a pile of cards in preparation for a fourth round of Snap.

"Uh, not really," Bingley replied hesitantly.

"What do you mean 'not really'?"

"I mean we're not really 'me and Jen', we're not like, a thing."

"But you like her? Oh, who am I kidding? Of course you like her. You called her an angel the first time you met her, and if your perpetual blush around her is any indication, you still think of her like that."

Bingley shrugged and looked slightly bashful. "I like her. I'm not sure if she feels the same way, I mean, I think she does, but I just don't know."

"If her perpetual blush around you is any indication, then I would say yes, she likes you too."

"But Darce, even if she does, I don't think anything will happen."

"Why not? Make it happen, Charlie."

"I don't know. We've been on a few dates I guess, if you can call them that. We've had a few meals together, but then again, I'm her bodyguard. I'm supposed to go places with her. I'm not really sure if our outings count as dates."

"That depends. As her bodyguard you're just supposed to follow her around. As a person she's dating you're supposed to take her out- it's more of a together thing. If it's a date, being her bodyguard shouldn't be the only reason you're there."

"Well, yeah, I mean I have asked her out for lunch or coffee or whatever, but the thing is I'm still her bodyguard even if I'm taking her out. The lines are so blurry. And honestly, being her bodyguard is never the only reason I'm there. I really like spending time with her, we have a lot in common, and don't roll your eyes, but she's really an angel." Darcy rolled his eyes even so, and Bingley reached over to lightly punch his arm. "The other thing is," he continued, "she's going back to China to finish up the school year there."

"Yeah, but that's not for very long, just another couple of months. Hey, aren't you going there with her anyway?"

"I don't know. We sort of spoke about it when I asked her if she was looking forward to going back, and it sounded as if she didn't think I would be going with her. I've been thinking about asking Mr. Bennet about it. He never told us how long these jobs would be for, he just said we were needed until the increased publicity he was facing died down, right? The thing is, even over here neither of the girls seems to be facing that much attention from the media. Other than when we got ambushed after Jen visited her dad at work and when you guys were followed to the library, the press haven't made much of an appearance. I don't really think Jen's going to face too much trouble way over in China."

"That's true," Darcy agreed, nodding his head. "That said, while Elise was at Carla Lucas's place yesterday, she got a call from some reporter looking to interview her. All this hype is about some
high profile merger, you know. I haven't really been keeping up, what with all the shit I have on my plate, but it seems like a really big deal. You've seen all the reporters outside Bennet's office though, haven't you? It's like they're camped out there, ready to pounce as soon as he leaves the building. Thing is, though, he's hardly ever leaves. Those vultures are going to get fed up of waiting around for him real soon. Then they'll be after our girls."

"Our girls?" Bingley questioned, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, you know, Elise and Jenine," he explained as he dealt out the pile of cards.

"I know that, but since when was Elise your girl?"

"Dude, she is so not my girl."

"You just said she was!"

"I did no such thing."

"You implied it!"

"Whatever."

"Darcy, come on! We've known each other, since we were... 15? 16? You laugh with her! Don't try and deny it, I counted it twice for sure. You never laugh with girls! You always glare. You hardly even laugh with me! Don't spout me any bullshit, and just tell me what you actually think of her!"

"Well, she's a nice body to guard, I guess," he responded, scratching the back of his head.

"Sorry, what? She has a nice body, did you say?"

"No! She IS a nice body."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"She's a nice body to guard... uh... what I'm trying to say is, she's a good... charge. Yup, charge is the word I'm looking for."

Bingley looked at Darcy as if he had just announced that he was pregnant. "So she doesn't have a nice body then?"

"No, she definitely has a nice body," he said with certainty, "from what I've seen," he mumbled.

"What do you mean 'from what I've seen'?"

"Huh?" Darcy didn't think it was a good idea to disclose what all he'd seen in San Diego. He worried that Elise might be embarrassed about others knowing. He certainly was embarrassed about the sequence of events that evening. "I mean, you know, like when she stands in front of me."

Bingley gave Darcy another 'you are so weird' look.

"SNAP!" shouted Bingley, slamming his hand down on the pile of cards.

"Elise, Honey, Nicoll is on the phone for you!" Fran bellowed up the stairs.

"Crap," she thought to herself. Having successfully avoided two phone calls from him the day
before, she had assumed that Nicoll Collins would abandon trying to reach her. It appeared he was more persistent than she had given him due for. Hearing her stepmother's footsteps on the staircase, Elise quickly scrambled into her en suite bathroom, locked the door and collapsed on the floor. She heard her stepmother's footsteps enter her bedroom.

Fran knocked on the bathroom door. "Nicol is on the phone for you, Honey," she called.

Elise scrunched up her eyes tightly and did her very best to sound constipated. "Ugh, I'm on the toilet, Fran," she groaned.

"Will you be out soon?" Fran persisted.

Elise groaned once more. "Uhh, I don't think so, ugh, I'm going to be in here a while."

She heard Fran sigh. "Well, I'll just tell him to call again later, then." Elise slapped her forehead and she heard Fran's steps retreating from her room. It seemed she wasn't going to get away from Nicoll that easily. Since the awkward dinner five days ago, Elise had already seen him twice. On Monday afternoon, Nicoll had arrived for lunch and another awkward meal ensued. Her 3 stepsisters had been at school, Jen at another job interview and her father at work, leaving her in the company of Nicoll and Fran. Aside from an initial ten minutes of small talk between herself and Nicoll, Elise couldn't honestly say what the conversation had been about. She had been somewhat aware of Fran asking Nicoll about his show, Nicoll singing the praises of Coach Cathy and the pair discussing fitness. She tried to nod at the appropriate places without actually paying attention. It was as such, that she found herself in a predicament when as she said goodbye, Nicoll responded with a 'see you on Wednesday, bright and early!'"

So it was, that on Wednesday at 7am, Hilary woke Elise at Fran's behest. Elise managed to pour herself a glass of orange juice before Nicoll made an appearance. She had not managed to drink it, and was quickly forced to cast it aside in favour of the spinach smoothie Nicoll has bought 'especially for her'. She dutifully drank it, trying to guzzle it down so that it missed her taste buds and went straight down the back of her throat. The drink wasn't nearly as foul as she had expected, but she would have much preferred her juice. Elise was then forced to endure an hour in the Bennet gym with a huffing and puffing Collins. Worst of all, at the end of the session, which she seemed to have survived much better than him, he insisted on hugging her goodbye. She had to clench her fists to stop herself reaching up to hold her nose in order to survive the smell. She had spent almost an hour in the shower after he left.

It wasn't just that she was facing numerous encounters with Nicoll, on top of that, Fran took every opportunity she could get to bring the man up in conversation with her youngest stepdaughter. She was behaving similarly with Jen, continuously mentioning J.W. to her. Furthermore, Jen had been sent to the Lucas house three times since the weekend, on various unnecessary and ridiculous errands. As if Angelica Lucas urgently needed to borrow a candlestand from Fran. Unless of course, she too wanted to kill Nicoll. Even if Jen seemed rather unfazed by Fran's behaviour, Elise was definitely growing annoyed with her stepmother, on both her own and her sister's behalf. It was apparent that Fran was up to something, and Elise had no doubt that whatever it was, she wouldn't be happy about it.

As a result continuous unwanted presence of Nicoll in her life, Elise felt entirely justified about pretending to be constipated to avoid him. After what she deemed an appropriate time, Elise emerged from the bathroom and went off in search of Jen.

She found her older sister sitting in her room with an empty suitcase on her floor and a pile of laundry at her side.
"What are you up to?" she asked as she stood in the doorframe.

Jen smiled up at her and Elise took this as an invitation to enter the room and sit on the bed. "Just sorting through clothes I need to take back."

"Already?" Elise ask, her tone coloured with surprise.

"Well, there's only another four days," Jenine replied, looking downcast.

Elise slid onto the floor and wrapped her arms around her sister. "I'll miss you," she said, frowning slightly.

"I'll miss you too, bubs. I always miss you when you're not around," she responded. Her voice suddenly descended into a whisper. "I know it's wrong of me, but I think you're the person I miss the most."

Elise giggled at her sister. "Of course you miss me the most, you should do,. I'm your most loved, most favouritest little sister. That, and I'm awesome." Jen rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "But maybe this time, it will be different," Elise continued. "Maybe this time there will be somebody else you'll miss more..." she added, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Who?"

"Oh I don't know, a certain redhead, perhaps? Answers to the name Charlie?" Elise gave her sister her best creepy smile. She suddenly sobered up, "That is, assuming he's not going with you?"

"Stop being silly, Ellie," Jen admonished. She turned her face away slightly in an attempt to hide her blush. "I'm not sure if Charlie's coming with me to China. I definitely don't think he needs to. The press hasn't been that much of an issue here, why would it be all the way over there?"

"Yeah, that is true. I thought you might want to keep him around though, you know, so you can continue stealing secret glances at each other and blushing."

"Shut up. We both blush a lot, don't we? Our kids-" Jen quickly stopped what she was saying and covered her mouth with her hand, the pink on her cheeks brightening.

"Aha! You're thinking of having his ginger blushing babies! You really like him!"

"I do," Jen nodded her head, sounding somewhat forlorn.

"Then why don't you want him to go with you to China?"

"It's unnecessary. It's a waste of Dad's money and his time. I like him, I mean, I like him a lot, but I don't want him to get in the way of my teaching either."

Elise smiled inwardly at the way her sister dismissed her desire for Charlie's company in favour of doing what she felt was better for everyone. Jenine was always trying to avoid being a burden to anyone, often at the expense of what she wanted.

"What did Dad say to that, though?"

"Nothing. I mean I haven't had a chance to speak to him about it yet. I tried to talk to him after dinner on Sunday, but he told me he had to rush back to work. Poor Daddy, he works so hard. I don't think many people are so committed to their jobs that they would go into work late on a Sunday night."

"Trust Jen to see Dad escaping his family as commitment to his job," Elise thought to herself.
"If he's been at home since then, I haven't seen him. I tried calling him at work, but his secretary answered and said he was in a meeting. I also tried dropping by his office in his lunch break, but he had a meeting that time too," Jen said, sounding a little sad.

Elise too had attempted to reach her father several times in the fast few days, without success. It was clear that he was expecting confrontation of some sort and was avoiding both girls.

Elise knew her father loved his two daughters, he showed it in how he was always buying things of them and in how protective he was of them. David had been genuinely upset when both his daughters had decided to spend the last year away from home. Even if he wasn't around to spend time with them at home much, he hadn't really reconciled himself to the girls leaving home, becoming upset and even irritated as a result.

"I stopped by his office too actually," Elise told her sister. "I've been needing to talk to him about San Diego and med school plans in general, but he hasn't been around. Did you see the press outside his building though? That was intense! A few of them tried to ask me questions when I went inside."

"Yeah I did! I was caught off-guard, actually. I'm so glad Charlie was there."

"I had a phone call as well, asking for an interview."

"Yes! I've had a couple like that! I've just been telling them I have nothing to say when I get asked questions."

"It's not that bad," Elise stated.

"No, it really isn't," Jen agreed, "but it's quite nice to have a bodyguard looking out for me all the same."

"I'm sure it is."

Elise gave her sister a knowing smirk and Jen smiled back shyly.

"Ok, I think I'm all done with this for now," Jen announced, gesturing at her packing. "I was going to bake some cookies. Want to help me?"

"Ooh cookies!" Elise jumped up gleefully. "I'd love to help!"

The two women made their way to the kitchen. As Elise was removing the brown sugar from one of the cabinets she heard the doorbell ring. Jenine started to move to leave the kitchen and answer the front door, but soon, they heard the sound of the door opening.

"Good afternoon. May I help you?" They heard the sound of Hilary's voice resonating in the hallway outside the kitchen.

"I'm here to see the younger Miss Bennet," Elise heard a smarmy voice she recognized as Nicoll's announce.

"Shit!" She unceremoniously dumped the bag of sugar on the table. "Jennie, you have to tell him I'm not home!" she pleaded.

"Ellie, but you are home. And I know he tried to call a few times yesterday. I don't want to lie to him," Jen said, sounding pained.

Elise thought quickly. "Ok, you don't have to lie to him," she said, making her way to leave the house out of the back door from the kitchen. "I'm going out, I'm actually not at home!" she said, sounding pleased with herself. Elise waved at her sister as she left out the back.
After a total of 6 rounds of Snap, Bingley's phone had rung. Darcy had picked it up from beside him, glanced at self-shot pouting photo of Carrie on the screen and tossed the device to his friend.

"Caroline, hi," Bingley answered calmly. He was sitting slightly hunched over, with his forearms rested on his thighs, his gaze on the floor. Darcy heard the muffled sounds of her response.

"Oh, yes, Willie… uh, I mean Darcy is fine." Charlie looked up at his friend as he listened to his cousin's rambles on the other end of the phone line.

"You want to talk to him? Oh. Uh, let me just see…" Bingley trailed off as he threw the other man a questioning look. Darcy wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

"He uh… he actually…um…" Darcy watched as Charlie floundered looking for an excuse. "He can't come to the phone right now, Carrie, I'm sorry." Charlie stood up and made his way from the living room into his own room, hmm-ing and ah-ing as Carrie continued her monologue.

Darcy sat there for a moment and then began tidying away the playing cards. Shortly, he heard a knock at the front door of the guesthouse. He was surprised to see Elise at his doorstep. He looked at her slightly puzzled for a moment, his body blocking the doorway so she couldn't enter.

"I'm really sorry," he started to apologise, "Did you call the guesthouse? I didn't hear the phone ring." He looked down at his bare feet, "Just give me a second, I'll grab my shoes and we can go."

"Go where?" Elise asked sounding confused.

"You're not here to ask me to get ready because you want to go out?"

"Oh!" she said, understanding dawning on her. "No, I just wondered if I could hide out here for a little while."

"Hide out? The press is at the house?" Darcy sounded worried. He straightened up and squared his shoulders, as if preparing to scare away hypothetical reporters.

"What? No, no. I just…" She debated telling him about Nicoll, but firstly she wasn't entirely sure how to go about explaining who he was and secondly she had not in the past known Darcy to be one for long conversations. "I just wanted to get away for a bit, you know, away from the bustle and all."

"Oh. Ok." Darcy realised he was obstructing her entry and awkwardly retreated. "Do you want to come in?" She shrugged nonchalantly and followed him inside. They both sat themselves on the couch. He turned to his left and eyed her warily. "So…" he began, "are you having a good day?"

Elise looked at him with a strange expression. "It's been… alright. You?" she responded awkwardly.

"Yeah, same."

"Soo… where's Charlie?" she asked, coming up with something they had in common. She was surprised that she was a having such a hard time talking to him. They weren't exactly close, but they had managed to have a few cordial conversations in the duration of their acquaintanceship. Somehow every time she spoke to Darcy, she felt as though they were starting again from scratch.

"He's on the phone with his cousin Carrie," Darcy explained, smirking.

Elise giggled and just like that, the ice was broken.

"What would you say to a game of Snap?" Darcy asked, picking up the pile of cards beside him.
"Snap? Seriously? I think the last time I played that was back in the days of Jen's braces and my puppy fat. Oh, what the hell, let's do it," Elise gave her assent.

Swiftly, Darcy dealt out the pack between them. Their competitive natures meant that the game, no matter how juvenile, was rather intense. Darcy won and Elise stuck out her tongue at him.

"It's a silly game anyway," she huffed.

"You're just a sore loser," he smirked.

"You're a bodyguard, if you didn't have faster reflexes than me we'd have a problem."

"I guess that's true, but you're going to be a doctor. You better speed up those reflexes, you're going to need them for life-saving. And anyway, I wasn't always a bodyguard."

"What were you before?" she inquired, genuinely curious, especially as she recalled Bingley's previous reluctance to discuss the two men's previous occupation.

"Um, I used to be an athlete," Darcy answered hesitantly. Under normal circumstances, this was not something he liked to talk about. Somehow though, he felt secure enough with Elise to tell her a little about his past. Ironically, the security he felt with her made him nervous.

"An athlete?" Elise asked. "Oh jeez, what is going on with everyone these days? I don't think I can deal with another person pushing me to go to the gym."

"Yeah. I used to compete professionally in swimming." Her face looked slightly contorted and he bristled a little. Sure an athlete was nowhere near as 'noble' and 'prestigious' and whatever as being a doctor, but a) she wasn't even a doctor yet and b) at least he wasn't a socialite. "What's the matter?" Darcy asked slightly curtly.

"Nothing, I'm just not… athletic."

"Oh." He eyed her suspiciously.

"So, why did you stop being a …" she paused to think of the right word and when she didn't find one, she went ahead and used her own term, "…swim person?"

"Why did I stop being a swimmer?" he corrected, smirking momentarily before he broke out into a scowl, unwilling to dredge up old memories. "I got injured." His reply was short and Elise decided to let the topic go.

Elise scowled as well, thinking back to Nicoll's critique of her athleticism. She knew perfectly well that it was illogical. Nicoll was no sporting expert nor was he in prime condition, but she wondered about how justified his censure was. "Hey, Darcy?" He turned to look at her, creases still present on his forehead, "do you think I'm unfit?"

He startled. "Oh shit. Is this like when a girl asks you if she's fat? You're supposed to say no immediately, right? Crap, I've spent so long thinking about this, my response isn't going to be immediate anymore. What is she talking about anyway? She said 'unfit' not 'fat'. Is it the same thing? What should I say?" He tried to be authentic by running his eyes over her physique quickly. "Noo…" he said slowly.

"He doesn't sound too sure. Hmph. Since when do I care what Fran or Nicoll think of me anyway? Why am I letting this bother me? I'm healthy, I don't need or want to be athletic."

She decided her
inner voice was right and plastered a perky smile on her face. "Oh good, I just thought I should check with a real athlete."

Darcy nodded seriously, although he had no idea what she was on about.
They sat side by side on deck chairs, by the Bennet family pool. She looked exceptionally cute in her floppy sunhat, the rim of which hung down over her eyes, shielding them from his view. She was reading a book and he was glad of it because if her attention had been focused on him she would surely be creeped out by his staring. She sighed gently, and he saw the change of expression on her mouth. She was pouting slightly and he knew that if he could see her forehead, little frown lines would be there. He wondered briefly what she was reading that had displeased her so, before he was once again distracted by the sight of her lower lip sticking out. He fought the urge to throw the damned book in pool, take her face into his hands and kiss her mouth. He couldn't completely restrain his impulses though and so he stood from his chair and walked two steps to her. She noticed his movement and dropped her book into her lap. He bent down and softly kissed her cheek.

"Charlie," Jenine sighed happily, "what was that for?"

"Nothing." He blushed, his boldness leaving him. "You were frowning…"

"Was I? This book is so sad," she said glumly. "Every time the protagonist tries to turn her life around, someone in her family gets in the way." She scooted over in the deck chair so that he could sit on the edge.

Bingley perched himself next to her. "I think life is like that sometimes. Just when you think everything is perfect, something infringes on it."

Jenine looked up at his face, her eyebrows drawn together. She was surprised at this sudden pessimism from her ever-smiling bodyguard. In her mind he was still her 'bodyguard' rather than her 'boyfriend'. Although there was some handholding, a few pecks on the cheek and numerous meals eaten together, she still felt that she couldn't say they were 'dating'. She was beginning to think that as long as he was still her bodyguard, she wouldn't be able to call it that.

Right now, she was at home, by the pool (hiding from Fran who was continuously sending her to the Lucas house with ridiculous excuses.) He didn't need to be there, but he was. She knew that his job wasn't the only reason he spent so much time with her, but as long as it was one of the reasons, she didn't feel like they could be in a real relationship. She didn't want him to be with her out of obligation.

"You know what I mean?" Bingley continued. "Things are never perfect."

"What's bothering you?" she probed gently. For him to have such a gloomy outlook, he must have something on his mind.

"Nothing," he replied. "Well… I was just thinking about you leaving again. I almost hope your dad does think you'll need security in China just so I get to go with you," he confessed, blushing.

Jenine frowned. While she didn't want to spend the next couple of months away from Charlie, she knew she didn't want him to be accompanying her as her bodyguard. Not only was she reluctant for their relationship to progress whilst she was part of his job, but also, she knew that having a man following her around all day was not going to be conducive to classroom activities while she taught.

She clasped his hand in hers. "Let's just enjoy the next three days. But I think we really need to have a discussion with my dad urgently. In fact, we should probably get things sorted out sooner rather than later," she announced, standing up.
Elise growled loudly as she saw the commotion outside her home.

She had intended that morning to nip out in Betty to buy the new Sims game she wanted. However, as she and Darcy had gone outside to where Betty was parked, they'd been met by a crowd of people with cameras and microphones gathered outside the gates of the Bennet property. Darcy had suggested that it might be better that instead of driving out in Betty herself, she let Hill drive them. She had agreed, and Hill had driven Elise and Darcy to a nearby electronics store. They'd been followed on the way there and she and Darcy had clambered out of the limo quickly. He'd shielded her with his body from the people pushing to speak to her. She'd quickly procured her game and they were on their way back home as soon as possible.

Now, as Hill was attempting to get the car through the throng of people outside the front gate, Elise's nerves were wearing thin.

"Hill, what is going on? Why are there so many people here? Dad's not even home!"

"No idea, little miss," Hill replied. "It would seem they're not here for your father."

"I just don't get it. We knew there would be more interest in us from the press because of Dad's merger, but this is crazy! This isn't the type of attention you get for a business merger, this is the type of attention you get when Kristen Stewart cheats on Rob Pattinson with you!"

Darcy snorted. "Something else has to have happened, you're right, all this can't be because of a simple merger, even if it is a high profile one."

Hill managed to manoeuvre the car through the crowd and into the driveway. There was a scramble to close the gate without enabling any of the reporters to get into the property.

Elise ignored the cries of "Miss Bennet!" as she got out the car and started to make her way towards the front door.

"Elise, can you tell us about the wedding?!" one of the reporters shouted.

Elise looked at Darcy in confusion, however his face was entirely blank. They both shrugged it off and entered the house.

In the hallway, they found Jenine and Bingley waiting.

"You're back!" Jen said cheerfully. "We were waiting for Hill, we're off to see Dad," she announced.

"It's crazy out there, Jen! There's loads of press outside. I have no idea what they want, this ruckus can't just be because of Dad and the company…" Elise told her sister.

Jenine looked worried for a moment before her usual serene expression returned. "I'm glad Dad got us bodyguards in that case," she said, smiling at the two men.

"I guess we'll head off now and get things over with." Jen started to make her way to the door, with Bingley following her. She was a little concerned about the press, but more worried about what her father would decide about Bingley accompanying her to China.

Bingley, Jenine and Hill were hounded by the press on their departure, throughout the journey and on their arrival at David Bennet's office building. Bingley had used his body to shield his charge
from the onslaught of people asking questions indistinguishable to the ear over the rowdy noise. When they made it up to Mr. Bennet's office, his secretary informed them that he was in a board meeting. They'd waited almost an hour in the foyer area until they were finally told he would see them in his office.

After greeting his eldest daughter with a hug, Mr. Bennet apologised for not being home often enough and promised that he would try to spend more time with her before she left. Jenine smiled brightly, but Bingley wondered if the man would keep his word.

Jenine began telling her father that she felt it unnecessary for Bingley to accompany her back to China. Although her father had yet to say anything to indicate where he stood on the issue, Jen was already on the defensive. Bingley was a little bit surprised and slightly hurt that she seemed not to want him to go along. He had thought they were simply looking to find out Mr. Bennet's decision. He hadn't known that Jen had already made her own decision.

Mr. Bennet too was surprised that his daughter had begun defensively. It was clear to him that she had already made up her mind. Jenine was usually much more amenable than her sister and for her to express her opinion so plainly, he thought she must feel strongly about the issue. He tried briefly to counter her arguments, saying he would be more comfortable if she had additional security and that it was only short term. When she did not seem any more compliant than initially Mr. Bennet came to a decision.

"Very well," he agreed, "You will return to China without Mr. Bingley."

Jenine was startled at how easily her father gave in to her demands. She had seen Elise and her father debate on occasion, and usually their discussion would continue for much longer. Elise clearly got her stubbornness from her father and thus Jenine found it odd that he was so easily persuaded. She was also surprised that her father hadn't brought up the increased press surrounding the family that day. It would appear that he hadn't noticed it yet. She brushed off her surprise at how easy persuading him was, thinking that perhaps he simply was not strongly convinced of his own views anyway.

"Jennie, if you would just wait in the foyer for a moment, I would like to speak to Mr. Bingley briefly about the termination of his position here."

Jen quickly acquiesced and left the office to chat with her father's secretary.

While Mr. Bennet was not the most affectionate of fathers, rarely spending time with his girls, he was very protective of his daughters. He was extremely wary of the girls living away from home. He had never been keen on Elise and Jenine doing anything other than living at home and working at the company with him. Although he spent more time at his office than at the Bennet house, he took comfort in knowing that his daughters were close by. Much of it stemmed from his own insecurity as a result of the departure of his ex-wife Madeleine with both daughters years ago. He had never gotten over her leaving him and thus he had a lingering fear that his daughters by her would too leave him behind someday, even though he wasn't there to begin with.

When Jenine left the room, David Bennet focused his eyes on the man sitting before him. Bingley began to feel somewhat uncomfortable under the older man's shrewd gaze.

"Mr. Bingley," he began slowly, "while my daughter believes that she knows what is best for her, I believe that I know better. And in the end, you are working for me. I no longer feel comfortable with my daughter living on her own some ten thousand kilometers away." Bingley was growing more and more perturbed by his employer's plan. "I don't know why I didn't think of this before," David continued. "You will be accompanying Jenine to China. However, she does not need to know that
this is the case." Bingley's face fell.

"Mr. Bennet-" Charles began to object.

"You will ensure her safety at all times, just like you have been over here, except this time, it will be from a distance."

"Mr. Bennet, what about her privacy? What if she finds out?"

"Mr. Bingley, there should be no need for her to find out. You are simply following her to ensure her security. You will not be taking photos like some private investigator, you will not infringe on her personal space like the paparazzi. I am simply asking you to keep my daughter safe. If that is too difficult a task for you, I should have no difficulty finding someone else to do it."

"You're right, sir," Bingley reluctantly agreed, "I can do as you ask."

"Very good." Mr. Bennet nodded his head and began rifling through papers on his desk. Bingley realised he had just been dismissed. He stood and went to find Jen.

"How did it go?" she asked, when he approached her.

"Great," Mr. Bennet nodded his head and began rifling through papers on his desk. Bingley realised he had just been dismissed. He stood and went to find Jen.

"How did it go?" she asked, when he approached her.

"Great," Bingley said unenthusiastically. Jenine didn't seem to notice his tone, and she subtly brushed her hand against his, feeling more comfortable being affectionate with him now that he was no longer going to be her bodyguard.

"I hope he gives you a good letter of recommendation," she said smiling.

"Me too…"

"You know… I could have just gone and gotten the game for you…" Darcy said to Elise as he followed her into the living room.

"Yeah, you could have, but then I could have just sent Hill. I wanted to go though. I had all these plans of overspending on random computer games like Lego Island and that game with the worm. I was also planning on taking loads of photobooth pictures of myself and making them the desktop background of all the Macs."

Darcy chuckled, "That would have been fun. It's a shame we were only in there for 4 minutes and 33 seconds."

"Were we actually only in there for 4 minutes and 33 seconds or did you choose that length of time because of the John Cage composition?" Elise questioned as she grabbed her laptop off the coffee table and inserted the disc.

"The John Cage composition," he admitted with a grin. "I'm surprised you knew about that."

"Excuse me? Did you just imply that I wouldn't remember my knowledge of 20th Century music dating back to my middle school days?"

Darcy gasped loudly, "I would never imply that."

The game started up and she eyed Darcy, who was standing awkwardly at the side of the sofa she was sitting on. "You want to play? Or rather… you want to watch me play?" she asked, nodding her head in the direction of the empty place on the sofa beside her. He happily sat down beside her, glad for the company.
Elise played for an hour or so, in between even relinquishing possession of the laptop to Darcy. She allowed him to play until he pissed her off by turning her simself into a vampire. When the doorbell rang, Elise at first was worried that it was someone from the press. However when Hilary entered the living room to say that a Mr. Nicoll Collins was waiting for her in the parlour, Elise's worry quickly turned to annoyance.

"Hilary, you have to tell him I'm not home," she pleaded. "Tell Fran he's here and she can deal with him, I'm leaving!" She held her laptop with one arm and yanked Darcy's up with the other. She pulled him to follow her as she decided to take the same escape route as yesterday, walking the way to the guesthouse with long strides as Darcy trailed behind her.

She wondered briefly how many times she could pull this off before Fran caught on and forced her to sit with Collins. It appeared Fran had taken in her own hands to enable Nicoll to reach Elise. After hiding with Darcy the day before, Elise had awoken to find an email from Nicoll in her inbox. He had even put in a link to Coach Cathy's twitter where he said she could 'get fabulous tips for getting fit'. Elise had replied with a 'thank you', just to be courteous, before flagging his email as 'junk'.

Arriving at the guesthouse, Elise and Darcy quickly plonked themselves down on the couch and resumed their gameplay. After a short while, Darcy disappeared briefly before returning with two glasses of ginger ale. He leaned over her shoulder watching as she played. One of his errant curls tickled her neck.

"Hey, stopp, your hair is poking me," she said as she pushed his head away.

Darcy worried for a second that he was genuinely making her feel uncomfortable with his proximity, but she poked him jokingly with her finger and his concerns dissolved. He smirked at her deviously and then turned his head rubbing it against her arm.

She giggled before she put on a stern face. "Stop that, you're going to make me drop the laptop."

Darcy sat up straight and grinned. He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to rectify the mess. Elise snorted at his efforts.

"What?" he demanded.

"Like that's going to make any difference," she replied sarcastically.

"I'm just trying to smooth it down."

"I hate to break it to you Darcy, but your hair wasn't exactly smooth to begin with."

He smiled sheepishly and ran his hands through it once more. "Maybe I should cut it short…"

"NO!" exclaimed Elise, a little too forcefully. His curls were beautiful. They reminded her of Paris of Troy. She herself had been somewhat tempted to run her hands through them a few minutes earlier.

He looked at her strangely. "Why not?"

Trying to quickly come up with a valid reason for her loud objection, she hesitated before responding. "Well… short hair will draw more attention to your ears."

"My ears…?" he repeated to himself, self-consciously raising his hand to touch the shell of his ear. He made a mental note to check in the mirror later exactly how much his ears stuck out. He was surprised at how offended he was by her criticism of his looks. Darcy had never thought himself unattractive before and he was a little bit hurt that Elise seemed to think him so.
"Dude, I am in some serious shit," Bingley announced as he slammed open the front door of the guesthouse. He was surprised to see Darcy sitting next to Elise on the couch and more than a little embarrassed at her hearing his outburst.

Both Darcy and Elise looked at him with expressions of concern. Darcy noted that it looked as if Bingley had been pulling his hair out as he looked at the ginger nest atop his friend's head.

Elise realised that her presence was now unwanted. "Oh… I should be going. I better get back to the house… to… you know… do stuff." Neither of the two men seemed to notice her fumbling and she quickly snatched up her laptop and made her exit.

"What the hell's going on, Bingley?" Darcy asked with his brow furrowed.

"I feel as if I just made a pact with the devil… except not the devil… Mr. Bennet… and oh gosh, I really like Jenine… but this is the end… I've killed it… I can't lie to her… but it's my job…" he rambled incoherently.

"Whoa, dude. Slow down. All I got out of that was that Mr. Bennet is the devil and that you killed Jenine. Which is just weird. So explain what happened, slowly… Did Mr. Bennet walk in on you guys?"

"Walk in on…No!" Bingley replied frustrated, "Nothing like that." Bingley dropped down on the sofa beside Darcy.

Charles squashed his cheeks together with the palms of hands in frustration. He looked so comical that Darcy would have laughed had he not be extremely concerned at the sight of the normally happy-go-lucky Bingley suddenly so very unhappy. Darcy stayed silent while he waited patiently for his friend to begin.

"You know how I was in limbo about whether or not I was going to accompany Jen to China?"

"Yup," Darcy confirmed.

"Well, we went to go see Mr. Bennet to find out his decision."

"Right."

"Ugh! I thought I was going to get a simple yes or no answer. Actually I thought I was going to get a simple yes answer, but instead when I get there Jen totally blindsides me and basically tells her dad she doesn't want me around! I know we weren't actually dating or anything, but I thought she liked me… I thought she'd want me to go with her… I thought she liked having me around…" He slumped forward as he explained, a dejected expression on his face.

Darcy patted his friends back comfortingly. "Charlie, I'm sure she likes having you around… maybe she just doesn't like having a bodyguard around."

"Isn't that the same thing?" Charles asked, his brow creasing.

"Well, not really. It's more the idea of a bodyguard that she's not keen on, rather than the idea of you. Remember how at the beginning of this whole stint, Elise gave me a really hard time because she objected to the idea of a bodyguard?"
"Actually, Darcy, I'm pretty sure she objected to the idea of you."

"Oh. Well this is different. It's not that she doesn't like you, it's that she doesn't like you guarding her. You have to believe that, dude, you've seen the way she is with you, why would you think she didn't like you?"

"It's really hard to say how Jen feels about people."

"In any case, I'm pretty sure she feels warm and fuzzy about you. But if you want to know for sure, it's not me you should be talking to..." Darcy smiled at his friend and patted him on the back once more. "There you go, that issue wasn't so hard to resolve after all. There's no need to tear your hair out."

"What? No, dude you don't get it. That's only a very small part of the issue. This whole thing is a much bigger disaster!"

Darcy eyed his friend with concern. Bingley went on to explain Mr. Bennet's decision and his demands that Bingley secretly follow Jen to China. Bingley's agitation grew and his tone became more and more desperate as he went on to describe how uncomfortable he was with deceiving Jen. When Bingley finished his speech all Darcy could say was "shit."

"I know, exactly, this is some seriously fucked-up-nasty-ass shit."

"Charles, this might sound real stupid, but... why didn't you just turn the job down?"

"I almost did. Gosh, I really wanted to. But he would just hire someone else to tail her without her knowing, and I felt like it was better if it was me, than someone she doesn't even know."

Darcy rubbed his forehead uncertain about whether his friend's choice had been the right one. He couldn't fault Bingley's reasons, but the whole scheme just didn't sit right with Darcy. He was hesitant to encourage Bingley either way as in the end, Bingley had to come to a decision that he was comfortable with. Darcy grimaced.

"What? You think I'm wrong?"

"No, I guess you're right about you being better than someone she doesn't know at all... bu-"

"Yeah, I think I'm making the right decision," Bingley announced, cutting Darcy off.

Darcy decided not to proceed with what he had intended to say. If Bingley thought he was making the right decision, that was all that mattered. Friends shouldn't interfere, friends should be supportive. If there was one thing he had learned in his life, it was that it didn't help to interfere. Interfering just got you into a mess.

"It's so shitty though, Darce," Bingley continued, looking at his friend glumly.

Darcy smiled at his friend sympathetically. "Hey, we'll figure everything out. I'm sure everything will be just fine."

"Um, hi?" Jen hesitantly greeted an expectant looking J.W. standing on the front doorstep.

"Hey Jen, sorry I took so long!"

"Took so long...? What do you mean?"
"Well, Fran said you needed me immediately but I was just about to get in the shower so I couldn't get here right away." J.W. explained.

"Jun Wei… I have no idea what you're talking about right now…" Jen tilted her head to the side slightly as she looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Uh… Fran called my house about 40 minutes ago and said you needed me immediately to help you figure out some chemistry project for your students," he began, Jen's puzzled expression making him increasingly uncertain. "I mean, I was a bit confused because I figured Els could help you at just as much as me… is it wrong that I was flattered that you wanted me instead of her? Not that I'm trying to one-up her or anything, I mean we have an element of competition in our friendship but it's all healthy you know? I'm not jealous or anything-

"Whoa… J.W. ... slow down… First of all, I know you and my sister aren't archenemies. That ended around the time she stopped shooting spitballs at you. Secondly, I teach 7 year olds. They don't even do chemistry as a subject. Our science lessons involve the kids rubbing balloons on each other's heads. And finally I definitely didn't ask Fran to call you… are you sure you didn't misunderstand?"

"Positive. At first I thought she meant Els was the one who needed help, but when I double-checked she said that whole thing about the project with your students, so I was pretty sure she meant you after that."

"Weird. Are you sure it was Fran?"

J.W. gave Jen his best 'bitch, please' face. "I think I know Fran's voice."

"Oh dear lord, it's shrill… definitely no mistaking it," he thought to himself, knowing it was best not voice negative opinions about people to Jen if you didn't want her to gently tell you off.

"Alyssa does pretty good imitations…" Jen suggested. She then remembered the one time Alyssa had tried to imitate an Indian accent but had ended up sounding more like Shrek. "…Sometimes…" she added. "She was probably just prank-calling you or something."

"Yeah… maybe."

"You know what, I'll go see if I can find Fran and Alyssa and find out what's going on. Are you going to stick around or…" Jen trailed off, not wanting to make J.W. feel unwelcome.

"Is Els home? I was going to come by and see her at some point anyway…"

"Yeah, I think she's in her room, I heard her going upstairs a little while back." Jen said turning around. J.W. followed her into the house and went upstairs to Elise's room while Jenine disappeared in search of answers.

J.W. knocked on Elise's bedroom door before tentatively opening it and stepping inside the room. Elise was on her bed, lying on her stomach with her knees bent and her feet in the air as she stared engrossed at her laptop screen. At the sound of footsteps entering the room, she slowly raised her eyes to see who was there. Seeing J.W. standing at the foot of her bed, waving awkwardly, she scrambled to sit up and quickly slammed her laptop shut.

"Hi," she said, her cheeks pink due to her flustered state.

"Hello. I came by because of some weird confusion between Jen and Fran, and I thought I'd come up here and say hello to you," he explained. J.W.'s curiosity was piqued by Elise's obvious desire to

"Oh, really? Let's see!"

"Oh, I don't think you'll find it very interesting."

"Uh-huh, sure," he said sarcastically. "Elise are you looking at…" he stopped and moved closer to her, whispering in her ear with mock secretiveness "…porn?" He gasped for added effect.

"What?! No!" she slapped her forehead. "Anyways," she began, attempting to change the subject, "what happened with Fran and Jen?"

Although he was not at all fooled by her attempt to steer the conversation away from whatever she was hiding, J.W. decided to let it go for the time being. "Oh, it was weird. I got a call from Fran saying Jen needed my help urgently with some science project for her students, but when I got here Jen told me there was no project and she basically had no idea what I was talking about. She obviously didn't need me so I decided to come hang out with you," he explained, nudging her playfully with his elbow. "Jen's gone to talk to Fran and see what the whole mix up is about."

J.W. looked around the room, having not been in it for some time. An idea suddenly came to him. "Hey, what happened to your shelves?" he asked gesturing at the back wall of her room.

Elise looked glumly at where her snow globe collection had once been displayed. "Well, when I came back from San Diego, I found this huge mess on my floor. All the glass from my snow globe collection was shattered on the floor and the shelves had fallen down and it was just this giant crazy mess," she explained, still staring at the wall.

Feeling pleased with the success of his plan, J.W. smirked and stealthily picked up the laptop without Elise noticing.

"Wait, I thought I told you this before…" Elise said, her head snapping back around to him. "In fact I called you specifically to bitch about Alyssa to you…" Elise glanced down, noticing her laptop now open and in his hands. Before she could reach out to grab it back from him, J.W. leapt from the bed and was standing with his back against the door with the laptop in his hands as he perused the screen.

"Google?" he asked. "This is in no way the scandalous material I was going to find. You're not even searching for boobs. 'Darcy Swimming'? What does that mean? And who is Nick D'arcy, Els?" he demanded as he clicked to see the other tab she had open.

"Not the right guy…" she said, her tone slightly doleful as she recalled the various websites all about some Australian blonde swimmer that was definitely not the Darcy in her guesthouse.

"What's Darcy Swimming, Els, and why didn't you want me to see it?"

Realising that although J.W. had probably seen her bodyguard from a distance, the two men had never been formally introduced, Elise quickly cooked up an explanation off the top of her head. "Well, I'm trying to get fit and stuff and somebody told me about this swimming coach who is supposed to be good called Darcy. I just didn't want you to make fun of me for wanting to get fit?"

J.W. looked so genuinely crestfallen at what she said that Elise felt guilt pricking at her conscience for lying to him. He sat down beside her on the bed. "Elise," he said, his tone sad, "I of all people would never make fun of you for wanting for get fit. I mean… I'm the guy who got called a beanpole..."
for the longest time. I know what it's like to feel uncomfortable in your body, you never have to be embarrassed about this kind of stuff around me."

The guilt really kicked in and Elise wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulders in a hug. J.W. freed his arms and hugged her back. Thinking that the atmosphere needed some cheering up he decided to move away from the topic. He figured if Elise needed someone to talk to, she would come to him of her own accord. "Ok, I don't want us to talk about depressing things, but I just want you to know that I think you're beautiful."

Elise smiled at him, thinking how blessed she was to count him amongst her closest friends. "Thanks," she said softly.

"Anytime," he responded sincerely. "Now tell me, have you ever Googled yourself?" he asked cheerily as he looked down at the laptop in his hands and typed his own name into the search box.

"Uh, no. I don't think so. Is this your first time?"

"Googling myself? No way! I do this a lot. Sometimes the press gets really good shots of me at my parents' fundraisers and stuff, so I always Google myself when I need a new profile picture."

"For real?"

"Yup! And I'm pretty lucky, 'cause like 99.9% of the pictures that come up are actually of me. There aren't exactly a lot of 'Jun Wei Lucas's out there."

"Ooh! That's a good one of you from your parents fundraiser that day!" she said excitedly as she scanned through the photos on the page J.W. had loaded.

"Hmm… yeah… it has potential. I might use it next." He scrolled down looking through the numerous images of himself. Not finding anything, he placed the laptop in Elise's lap. "Here, your go."

Elise typed her name in and waited for the page to load.

"Wow, that's quite a lot of results for your name."

"Yeah I know! I feel like a real celebrity right now. Wow, some of these pictures are random though, that's definitely not me," she said, pointing at an image of a pug sitting on a red cushion. "Let's see what's in the web results." She read through a couple which were related to the research she had been doing in London. Scrolling down through the results Elise swept her eyes over the descriptions until saw one that caused her to raise her eyebrows. She stopped scrolling and hovered the cursor over it.

"This looks… interesting…" she said to J.W.

He looked to see what she was referring too. "Hah! Click it!" he demanded, amused by what she was referring to and keen to see the full article.

The webpage opened and Elise began to read out loud. "Elise and Jenine Bennet to have Double Wedding." She paused for effect after reading the title. "Sources tell us that there maybe a double wedding in the near future at the Bennet household. Both Bennet sisters, Jenine (25) and Elise (24)-Hey! I'm not 24! Stupid article doesn't even know how old I am!" Elise scowled at the mistake.

J.W. decided to pick up reading. "Both Bennet sisters, Jenine (25) and Elise (24) seem to be getting serious with their respective beaus. Jenine has been seen leaving the Lucas residence early in
morning after what we can only assume was a steamy night with her boyfriend...Jun Wei...Lucas..." J.W. trailed off as he stared at the article in outrage. "Steamy nights! What the hell?! I'm not Jen's boyfriend! She didn't even come to see me! She came to bring over some candle stand thing and she left within like 10 minutes! She most certainly didn't spend the night. And she wasn't even leaving early in the morning! That was like 10 o'clock!"

Curious as to the rest of the article, Elise took over reading once more. "Elise and her love Nicoll Collins..." Elise choked in her shock. "Nicoll Collins! That man is most certainly not my love! He's gross!" she spluttered.

J.W. took the reigns once more. "Elise and her love Nicoll Collins, host of the hit chat show 'Nicoll Collins Interviews Famous Personalities in Various Domains' seem to have gotten very serious very fast. Nicoll has been spotted at the Bennet family home on more than one occasion and he recently tweeted a photo of a sweaty Elise running on the treadmill with the caption 'running next to her makes my heart run wild.'- Oh wow. That's cheesy.- If that wasn't enough to suggest upcoming nuptials between the two couples, their stepmother Fran practically confirms it in an interview we had with her earlier this week. You can watch her statement in the video below."

J.W. and Elise both looked at each other with shock evident on their faces. "What the hell?!!" Elise demanded. She clicked to play the video and Fran's voice played from the laptop speakers. J.W. cringed at the shrill sound.

"Well, I don't want to confirm or deny the rumors, but I can tell you that I am currently working on designing a line of wedding dresses!" Fran told the blonde interviewer on the screen with a cheeky wink.

"Holy shit!" J.W. said with a deep intake of breath. "What the hell is going on? This has to be completely out of context!"

"I have no idea what this mindfuckery is, but I'm going to find the only person that seems to know anything about it!" Elise declared resolutely as she pushed the laptop off her lap and stood. She marched out of the room with J.W. trailing behind her mumbling to himself and pinching the bridge of his nose. Hearing Fran and Jen's voices in the gym, Elise pushed the door open.

"I think we need to talk," she announced.
"Elise, honey, calm down. What is it that you're getting so worked up about right now?"

Fran's somewhat patronising tone only served to fuel rather than abate her stepdaughter's anger. Elsie turned to face her older sister in search of support.

"Jen you'll never guess what I just discovered" she said, with false cheer. "According to Just Jared, you and Jun Wei here are engaged to be married. And more horrifically still, myself and Nicoll Collins are too be married too!" she announced, with a look of utter disgust.

"Of course, it all sounded absolutely fantastical to me, and I said to myself 'oh Elise, don't take this personally, tabloids these days just publish anything with no basis for it all' and then BAM! I find a video of Fran feeding the tabloids some shpiel about how she's making us WEDDING DRESSES!" Elise was starting to become more and more worked up. J.W. placed his hand on her arm in an attempt to calm her down, but when she turned to look at him, eyes blazing, he realised his effort was in vain.

Jen groaned loudly, a sound rather uncharacteristic of her. "Oh gosh. Fran why do I get the feeling that the brilliant idea you had that you were just about to tell me about and what Elise discovered are related?"

Fran squealed loudly and clapped her hands together excitedly. "Elise, hon, you are blowing everything out of proportion! Just wait until I fill you in on this idea I had. It is the plan of the millennium! No, wait! It's the plan of the century!"

J.W. interjected solemnly, "Actually Fran, a century is-" he abruptly dropped what he was saying when he was given a glare from Elise and waved off by an uninterested Fran.

"Pray, do tell us about this brilliant plan of your's Fran," Elise said sarcastically.

"Well they other day I was getting this amazing Indian head massage at the spa- by the way, Ellie you should totally book an appointment for one- you're starting to get frown lines! And you're still so young! It would just be terrible for you to have wrinkly skin before you're even 30! Have you been using night cream?"

"Yes, yes, Fran I have. Why don't you finish enlightening us about your idea?" Elise answered hurriedly, trying to get her stepmother back on track so that she could find out what was going on.

"Well anyway, as I was getting this massage, I was thinking to myself, I should start developing a new fashion line! Especially after my summer collection was so popular! And I suddenly remembered watching 'Say Yes to the Dress' on TLC- oh by the way, what is with everyone talking about that little Honey Boo Boo girl?! She's not even a cute kid! When Alyssa was 3 I entered her in a beauty pageant and of course my baby girl won! She was so adorable! Kids these days are getting uglier-"

"Fran, your idea?" Elise reminded.

"Yes, well. I was watching 'Say Yes to the Dress' and there was this absolutely stunning Fenoli gown that this girl was trying on. So beautiful, loads and loads of ruffles and layers and it was just stunning. And then I thought to myself, that dress is so gorgeous, but it just is so... plain! And understated! How would the bride get all the attention with a dress like that? And just like that, BAM! I realised what was missing! Diamontés! With a little extra sparkle that dress would have been
perfect, don't you think?"

"Yes Fran," J.W. agreed, nodding emphatically.

"Anyways, I said to myself 'Fran, you have to put this fashion sense of yours to use! You can't let millions of women out there, in the world, walk down the aisle on their special day in second rate dresses!'"

"God forbid it," Elise added sarcastically.

"So, I decided that this year, I am going to start my own line of FrancissaBennet wedding gowns! I know you're wondering what this has to do with you girls, so let me explain the second part of this idea of mine! Well, as you know, to me there is nothing more important in this world than my family, and my girls," she stated solemnly.

"Except Juicy Couture," Elise added mentally.

"I knew I could never ever let my beautiful baby girls walk down the aisle in some trashy minimalist dress," she explained, with a loud sniff and her hand placed over her heart. "So I thought, what better way to show my girls how much I love them than to design their wedding dresses for them!"

"But Fran...none of us are getting married any time soon," Jane said.

"I know! And that was the problem! So I knew I would have to help you guys find husbands. And then I thought to myself, 'why Fran, this is absolutely perfect! You could help girls find the right guys and the right dresses! And it would perfect for reality TV!' And my top priority was you girls. I just knew you'd love the men I chose for you! Gosh Jenine, I don't know why I never thought of setting you up with Jun Wei before! And Elise! You and Nicoll are just the cutest couple ever!"

Elise stood there with her mouth agape unable to believe her ears. Her stepmother was trying to set her up with Nicoll Collins so she could have a televisied wedding in one of the most garish wedding dresses on the face if the earth. Fran was taking Evil Stepmother to a whole new level.

"Fran, you're trying to set me and Elise up with so that you can make a TV show based on our weddings?" Jen said slowly, the insanity of her stepmother's plan sinking in.

"Oh, honey, you're making it sound so selfish! I'm doing this for you girls!"

"This is insane," Elise thought aloud.

"You just need some time to let it all sink in, Hon'," Fran reassured.

"You thought that out of your daughter's... Jenine was the right one for me?" J.W. said, sounding somewhat affronted.

"Well honey, who else would I choose? You're going to be a doctor, that's absolutely perfect for Jennie!"

"Oh my God." Elise dropped down to the floor, sitting cross-legged, her elbows rested on her knees and her head drooped and her hands covering her eyes.

"What's the matter Ellie? You don't need to stress about wedding planning or anything! I'll sort it all out for you!"

"Fran, I don't think that's what she's upset about. I know you just wanted to help, but Fran, these are
the kind of decisions we would like to make ourselves. And neither of us is ready to get married at
the moment."

"Aw Jennie, but you girls so clearly need my help! Matters of the heart can be so difficult and I just
want you girls to make good matches! I know a lot about this!"

Elise snorted loudly. "Yeah, clearly. You and Dad clearly have a great deal of marital felicity. That
must be why he's moved into his office."

"Elise!" Jen scolded,

Fran's face fell and she sniffled loudly. "Elise, I don't know why you're getting so snippy about this!
Is Nicoll not what you wanted? It doesn't have to be Nicoll... Jenine how do you feel about Nicoll?
Elise, I guess you could take J.W. instead of Jane having him...?" Fran suggested, sounding anxious.

"Why would you put me with Jane of all your daughters?" J.W. winged again.

"Shut up, Jun Wei! Fran, the problem isn't Nicoll! Well, actually, he's part of the problem. But the
main problem is that you are batshit crazy!" Elise shouted standing up and storming out of the room.

Fran looked from J.W. to Jenine, shell shocked. "I really had no idea she found Nicoll so repulsive!
They seemed to be getting along so well! And gosh, they were so cute together!"

J.W. smiled weakly at Jenine, suddenly feeling even more uncomfortable. He backed out of the room
slowly, as if wary of being pounced on, and waved awkwardly at Jen and Fran before disappearing
out the door.

Jen took Fran by the hand and led her to sit down on one of the benches at the side of the gym.
"Fran, I know you were really excited about planning weddings for us, but I have to tell you, neither
me nor Elise are ready for marriage yet! I know that when the time comes though, we'd both love to
have you plan our weddings and make our dresses." Jen knew Elise would never agree to Fran's
involvement in her wedding, but in the interest of keeping Fran happy, she wasn't against stretching
the truth.

Fran smiled happily, and gave Jen an exaggerated wink. "Oh, I get it. You girls need some more
time to sow your wild oats!"

"Fran, I don't think... uh, never mind."

"Hmm? Ok. Gosh all the negativity from your sister has just fried my nerves! I'm thinking I could do
with another of those Indian head massages! Would you like to come with me to the spa?"

"Oh I'd love to, but I've got to get packing. I'm flying out the day after tomorrow! I've got so much to
get done before then," Jen explained.

"Oh, okay honey, I'll see you later then!" Fran smiled and headed off to find Hill so that he could
take her to the spa.

Jen stayed sat down, shocked at Fran's scheme and worried about what her sister would do in her
moments of anger.

"Um, hello?" Carla said groggily, having just awoken from a nap. She looked at the strange man on
her doorstep through the screen on the intercom.
"Is this the Lucas residence?" he replied, beaming at her through the screen in a way that she found more than a little scary.

"Yes it is..." she trailed off waiting for him to explain who he was.

He looked at her expectantly. "This is Nicoll Collins. I'm looking for Elise Bennet. I was led to believe she was paying a visit to you."

"Oh... She's not here..."

"Oh that's ok, I'll just come in and wait for her."

"Uh..."

"May I know who I'm speaking to?"

"Carla Lucas. Listen, I don't think Elise is coming over today..."

"I'm fairly sure she is."

"Um... Ok then... I'll buzz you in."

Carla pressed the key sign on the intercom to open the gate to the strange man. She then grabbed her mobile from next to her pillow and dialled Elise. She waited patiently as the phone rung, but there was no answer. So she picked up her phone and went downstairs, deciding to try against she didn't manage to get rid of the strange man. Throwing on some more respectable clothes, she went downstairs to find Nicoll Collins with his nose in a bouquet of flowers in the hall.

"Uh... those are plastic."

"Hmm?" he replied, sounding surprised. "Plastic? Wow! They look quite real! In fact Cathy Derbug, who I'm interviewing on my show, as I'm sure you know, has flowers just like these growing in her garden!"

"She has plastic flowers in her garden?"

"Oh, of course not! Hers are quite real!"

"How delightful." Carla led the way into the parlour and sat down. There was awkward silence. Carla inspected the pattern on the ceiling for several minutes. She then moved on to examining her chipped blue nail polish.

"I sense a tension in the room, and I'm pretty sure I know what it is," Collins announced.

Carla sat up in her chair, surprised at the interjection.

He continued, "You know who I am, yet you are embarrassed to admit that you recognise because you don't want to seem like too exuberant a fan."

"Huh?"

"It's ok, don't feel embarrassed. I appreciate the admiration of all of my fans!"

"Your fans...?"

"Yes. My fans, fans of my show, what's the difference?"
"What show?" Carla asked, genuinely puzzled.

"My talk show? Surely you know of it! 'Nicoll Collins Interviews Famous Personalities in Various Domains'."

He looked so affronted that Carla felt it best to lie. "Oh!" she exclaimed, her false surprise would have been obvious to anyone one with social skills. "Actually I do think I might have heard of it…"

"Yes, most people who keep on top of media on goings are aware of my show. It is a leader in the talk show field. In fact, my show was the reason I was summoned over here from San Francisco in the first place. You know of Francissa Bennet, of course? Your friend's mother? Oh, of course you do. Your family is closely connected to hers. Well she specifically asked me to come out to meet Elise, as she thought we could maybe foster a relationship. You know… of an intimate nature."

Carla visibly cringed. "So Fran wanted to set you up with Ellie because she's a fan of your talk show?"

"Well… yes… but also no. Francissa wanted for Elise and I to marry so that the company that produces 'Nicoll Collins Interviews Famous Personalities in Various Domains' could produce a reality TV series based on our wedding for which she would provide the dresses. This would help her fashion line and also allow Elise to get some of the public recognition she has been lacking."

"Fran was arranging your marriage to Elise so that she could base a reality TV show on it to help publicise her fashion line?"

"Well… yes. But also… no. I was in fact looking for someone in the public eye to… um… date… so that we could then start our own production company for several TV shows. My celebrity status as a result of my current show and this person being someone well recognised would help lay the foundation for this plan."

"So essentially, both you and Fran were using Elise to further your careers?"

"No, most certainly not! I would not hide my motivations from my intended if Elise and I became more serious. In the end though, considering the divorce statistics of this day and age, is business not as sound, if not more sound a foundation for marriage as some fickle infatuation? Anyway, I'm sure it could grow into something more."

Carla nodded mutely, contemplating Collins' logic. While initially finding him entirely foolish and fanciful, she could understand his rather desperate drive to further his career ambitions.

"Anyhow, it does not look like Elise will be arriving here anytime soon. I shall perhaps pay a visit to her home this evening. It was good talking to you, Carla," he announced standing up and walking briskly to the front door.

Carla waved goodbye at him and then made her way upstairs. She collapsed into a beanbag with a book Elise had recently leant her but quickly discovered her concentration was elsewhere.

Nicoll thought it was worth calling Elise one more time in an attempt to learn her whereabouts. He almost didn't notice when he heard the dial tone stop until his ears were assaulted by a furious sounding voice at the other end of the phone line.

"I don't know whether or not you were party to my evil step-mother's scheme and frankly I don't care, but Nicoll Collins don't ever bother calling, emailing, tweeting or anything-ing me again because I will never ever marry you. And you can take 'Nicoll Collins Interviews Famous
Personalities in Various Domains' and shove it where the sun don't shine!"

Before he could formulate a response, she had hung up.

Nicoll looked sadly at his phone, more upset by the now failed business scheme than by the loss of a love interest.

Hours later, after re-watching one of Coach Cathy's backstroke races from her heyday, Nicoll's phone rang. He eyed it hopefully before answering.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Nicoll."

"Carla! How pleasant to speak to you again!"

"Indeed. Listen Nicoll, I just wanted to ask you how you would feel about setting up a production company which also produced investigative journalism documentaries?"

"Exactly what did you have in mind?"
Chapter 13

"So, are you going to start ranting and raving or are you just going to keep glaring at me?"

Elise squinted her eyes at her father even more pronouncedly.

"The wind will change, and then your eyes will be stuck like that."

"Are you trying to tell me, Father, that you are entirely unaware of your wife's scheming plans?" Elise demanded.

"I like to ensure that I am never aware of my wife's plans," he replied satirically, "that way, I can make sure I'm never party to them."

"Hardy har har," Elise remarked, snarkily.

"Don't get short with me, Elise. Why is it so unreasonable for me not to have any idea about what my wife is up to? I dare say you spend more time at home with her than me. And if you're only just discovering some elaborate scheme of hers, why is it so inconceivable that I might not know anything about it?"

"Hmph. The discussion about how unreasonable the lack of time you spend at home with the woman you married is can wait until another time. Anyway, I don't stick my nose into your personal life, since I expect you to do the same for me. I extend the same courtesy to Fran, but she seems to have missed the memo about treating others the way you would want to be treated."

"Uh huh. So, what exactly is this scheme you discovered?"

"Fran decided that she needed to marry me off to that awful toad Nicoll Collins so that our marriage could provide the basis for some trashy reality TV show which she would use to publicise a line of wedding dresses she would design," she blurted out angrily, without taking a breath.

David snorted loudly. "She thought she would bring TV cameras into our home? How did she think I would ever agree to that?"

Elise's annoyance mounted considerably as she found her father focusing on what to her was the least outrageous aspect of the whole scheme.

"That's what you're focusing on? How about the fact that she was arranging the marriage of your youngest daughter to an absolute nincompoop?"

He sniggered at the thought. "Actually that part I wouldn't have minded, family meals would suddenly be more worth coming to with additional entertainment in the form of the court jester."

Elise rolled her eyes with annoyance. Her father never took anything seriously, and while that meant they shared a lot of witty banter, it also meant that he never appreciated her concerns nor did he assuage them as any daughter might expect her father to.

"Dad, seriously," she said, trying to convey to him the lack of amusement she was taking in the situation, while also realising it was futile.

"Exactly what do you want me to do, Elise? Send Francissa to the naughty corner? That woman does whatever she wants and leaves me out of it. That's what makes our marriage so beautiful."
"I'm not here to ask you to tell Fran off, I'm here to tell you that I'm moving out. I figured I'd better come inform you since given that you're never home, you're unlikely to notice otherwise."

"Moving out? And where exactly will you be moving in to?"

"Wherever I find on such short notice."

"Elise, you'll be off after the summer anyway for this whole medical school palaver you've decided to go after. Surely you can survive 3 more months at home?"

"I don't think I can as long as Fran and Alyssa live here. At least, not with a full head of hair. And I am rather attached to these luscious tresses. What's the point in me being at home anyway? Jen's off to the airport tonight… You barely live at home, Carrie, Alyssa and Fran drive me up the wall and Mars spends as much time locked in her room as you spend locked in this office."

"I'm not keen on you moving out alone."

"I'm 23 years old. I lived across an ocean from you for a year. I lived away in college. I only come home for the holidays. Technically I moved out 5 years ago. Once med school starts, I'll start coming back home for holidays again. I just can't actually live in that house anymore. It's going to make me certifiably insane."

"Elise…"

"Dad what do I have to do to prove to you that I can live alone?"

David sighed loudly. "I will concede to this under one condition."

"Pray, do tell."

"The increased media attention is still an issue for the company. And apparently increased media attention is also going to be an issue for you because of Fran. That makes rather a lot of increased media attention. Rather too much for my liking. And so my condition is that you do not actually live alone but rather you live alone with your bodyguard."

"You're telling me to move out of home only to move in with Darcy?"

"Yup."

"That's like telling me to move from a roach infested house into a termite infested apartment."

David raised his eyebrows at her.

"Ok, maybe that was a little harsh, termites aren't actually all that annoying," she said sarcastically.

"Would you rather I fire him and find you a new bodyguard?"

Elise's eyes widened. "What?! No! Don't fire him!"

"If you don't want him fired and replaced, what exactly do you want? You will have a bodyguard if you move out, that's part of the agreement."

"Since Jen's away, could I not just have Charles instead?"

"I'm afraid not. Mr. Bingley is on another job during the time Jen is away."
"Dangflabbit."

"Basically, I'm giving you an ultimatum here. You either move out on your own with your bodyguard, or you continue living at home."

"Or I could just move out whether you like it or not…?"

"You really couldn't. You don't have the funds. The remains of your research stipend aren't even going to get you a cardboard house in this city, at best you might be able to find a supermarket trolley to live in. And you won't be able to take out a loan; you don't have a good enough credit rating. You're also never going to manage to reach your mother and get her to send you out money fast enough for your liking. I'll restate the offer just for clarity: Either move out on your own with your bodyguard, or you continue living at home."

"And if I live at home, I still have to have a bodyguard anyway?" she asked, frowning deeply.

"That's right. Both roaches and termites," he responded, smirking.

"The choice is easy then. I'll start looking for 2 bedroom places to rent."

"70lbs."

"70?! Oh gosh! How is it so much heavier? On the way here it was half that! How could I have added so much stuff?!"

"Oh, I don't know, Jenine, maybe it was the entire bookshop you have packed into your suitcase for your class of kids that can barely read?"

"Elise, how exactly do you expect them to learn to read without books?"

"I'm not disputing that they need books to learn to read, I'm just wondering if Anne of Green Gables is the right series to start them out on?"

"I know they won't be able to read some of the books I bought yet, but I'll be able to read those books to them in story time. And anyway, just the presence of books creates an atmosphere conducive to learning to read! I want my kids to have encouragement and motivation, and those books will be goals, distant or otherwise, for them to achieve."

"But why didn't you just buy the books over there?"

"Because you don't find all these books over there. And anyway, I have a Barnes and Noble card."

Elise shrugged and gave up arguing with her sister.

"I can't believe you had to sit on my suitcase to get it to close! Gosh, how am I going to lift this behemoth?"

"The trick is not to lift, but to drag. And when you need to get it on and off the conveyor belt, the trick is to pout and bat your eyelashes, so some dude does it for you," Elise explained.

Jenine laughed softly. "I almost wish Charles was going with me - pretty sure he could lift this with no trouble at all."

"Jen… If you want him to go with you I doubt you would have a hard time convincing Dad, who will not budge on me keeping Darcy around if I move out, or even Charles himself! I definitely think
he'll be up for following you around some more."

"Ellie, I am so sure that this is the right way to go about things. If Charles doesn't come with me, Dad won't be paying him to basically stand around all day bored and chatting to me since there's nothing to protect me from. It also means I can do my job a whole lot better… a 6'2" man with flaming hair in my classroom would definitely distract my kids from learning to read. And another thing - spending a few months apart will help us put things in perspective. What if he discovers that the only reason he was interested in me was because he was stuck spending so much time with me that he didn't get to meet anyone else?"

"Jenine, it's not me you have to convince…"

"Elise, I am convinced I'm making the right decision. It's just that I'm going to miss him… and he's so cute."

Elise wrapped her arms around her sister tightly. Jenine freed her arms from her sister's grip so she could hug her back.

"I hope he waits…" she whispered almost inaudibly into Elise's hair. Elise just nodded, practically imperceptibly knowing that her sister's confession was just that - she wasn't looking for reassurance, she just needed to say it.

Elise loosened her grip on Jenine and sat herself on the edge of Jen's bed. She let out a sigh and flopped backward, so she lay staring at the ceiling. A few, short seconds passed before Jen joined her.

"Don't let me fall asleep! I'll miss my flight."

"Don't let me fall asleep either! I need to come drop you off at the airport."

"You really don't! It's 2am Elise, there is absolutely no need for you to trek to the airport with me when you could be asleep in your bed."

"I want to say goodbye properly!" Elise whined.

"You can say goodbye properly without leaving the house."

"Jen, you know I have weird issues about saying goodbye to people I love. I need to come to the airport. It will make me feel better."

Jen knew her sister did in fact have issues saying goodbye to people. Elise needed to have goodbyes that felt momentous and final in order to feel at ease with leaving or sending someone else off. The day Elise had left for England, she had said goodbye to the rest of the family at the house complete with waving from the limo window. She had then asked Hill to stop at the Lucas household on the way to the airport so she could say 'proper' goodbyes to Carla and Jun Wei specifically. When once several years ago, their mother had left town while Elise was in class and had sent her a text to say goodbye, Elise had been extremely anxious the entire time Madeleine was away. She had continually tried to get in touch with her mother the entire duration of her trip, much more frequent calls were placed than on other occasions. Jen knew that the unconventional state of their family was the cause of Elise's need for dramatic goodbyes.

Jen turned her head from staring straight up to face her sister. She smiled gently. "Thanks. I would really love for you to come if you're up for it and really want to."

Just then there was a very soft knock at the door, before it slowly opened and revealed Marissa's
head peeking in. Jenine had already said goodbye to her father, Fran, Alyssa and Carissa, all of whom were in bed.

"Hey," whispered Marissa softly, "just thought I'd come hang out with you guys for a little before I go to bed."

Jen waved her hand to beckon the other girl in. Marissa turned and softly closed the door. Jen smirked a little as she caught sight of her stepsister's Sesame St 'The Count' pyjamas. Marissa hopped up onto Jenine's bed and filled the gap between her sisters.

"Sweet PJ's," Jen complimented.

"Thanks, they're my favourite," Marissa acknowledged. "Jenny Jen Jen, I'll miss you! I'm glad you'll be back soon. I know we have a seriously dysfunction family but I like it when we're all together."

"I'll miss you too, Missy," Jen responded.

Elise cleared her throat before beginning to speak somewhat hesitantly. "So, this is kind of an awkward time to break this news what with this being Jen's goodbye time and you just making that pretty touching statement, Mars, but I think I should probably tell you guys this sooner rather than later. Firstly, I just wanted to say that this is totally not a big deal and it's more for the sake of my sanity than anything else - it's not supposed to be a big change and-

"Just get to the point Elise," Marissa demanded, frowning at the other girl.

"I spoke to Dad today, and well... I'm going to be moving out. I'll still be in LA, I'm not leaving town or anything, I just need my own space. I won't be far off," Elise announced. She held her breath once she finished speaking, hoping not to get any particularly upset reactions.

"Totally saw this coming. I thought it would happen after Alyssa smashed your snow globes, but now with Fran's scheming - Jen told me about the whole thing earlier and oh my gosh I think I ruptured something laughing at the image of you and Nicoll Collins walking down the aisle by the way - but yeah, with Fran's scheming and Jen leaving, you don't really have much to keep you in this house."

"I'm glad you found it funny, the mental image of that makes me nauseous! And, oh, this house has a great many merits that would make me want to stick around for the record - I mean there's the pool, the elevator I can just repeatedly ride up and down in, the tennis court and that's pretty much everything aside from, oh, I don't know, YOU. It's just that I'm going to lose it living in this house any longer. Fran and Lyss made me crazy back when I lived at home, but then I was well adapted and could deal with it. Now, I've been away and I've gotten used to my independence. I don't know how to regress. You genuinely are always welcome to visit me, Mars, I probably won't be at the house all that much in the near future if I ever want to have a vaguely amicable relationship with your mom in the future."

"It's such a shame it's come to this Ellie," Jane said mournfully.

"It is, but I'm genuinely so annoyed with Fran and what is perhaps more annoying for me is the fact that nobody else seems to think that my annoyance is legitimate."

"It's not that, Elise," Marissa explained. "We do think you have a right to be annoyed, it's just that my mom really doesn't get that trying to marry you and Jen off to convenient people is not ok, and she means well with the whole thing, so everybody kind of lets her off a little."

Realising that Marissa was becoming slightly defensive about her mother and recognizing the truth in
her explanation, Elise decided the situation was not worth arguing over and nodded.

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, you're always welcome to visit, Mars."

"Thanks Els," she said, smiling.

"Wait a second Elise, are you going to be living completely alone? Does that mean you won't need Darcy anymore?" Jen said, sounding somewhat worried.

"Oh no, he's part of the deal I have with Dad. I get to move out, as long as I keep Darcy."

"Oh, good," Jen said, sounding relieved.

"So were you worried about you little sister's safety or were you worried that you might be losing yet another connection to lover boy?" Elise asked, smirking. Marissa sniggered and turned to see Jenine's blushing face.

"I don't know what you mean, Elise. Of course I was worried about your safety and anyway I have Charlie's number," Jen responded, a tenacious expression on her face.

"Of course you do," Elise said, her smirk growing more pronounced.

"I love that you're finally admitting he's your 'lover boy'," Marissa announced, chuckling.

"I said no such thing," Jen responded stubbornly.

"Maybe, but you didn't dispute it when Els said it."

"That's because I was busy disputing her other point."

Elise and Marissa glanced at each other and broke out in giggles. Jenine playfully smacked Marissa, as she was the nearest, before joining in on the giggles herself.

Several giggle fits later, Elise turned to look at the clock on Jen's nightstand. Jen, noticing Elise's movement asked what time it was.

"It's just turning 2," Elise replied solemnly.

"We better get going then. I don't want to cut it too fine, what if the airport is really crowded?" Jenine said, with her forehead creased.

Marissa sat up, and patted down her hair, which was looking something akin to a haystack. She pouted at Jenine theatrically. "I'm going to head to bed, Jenny Jen Jen. Have a safe flight, go enlighten developing minds and I'll see you in not too long, hopefully," she said, moving towards her stepsister to give her a very brief hug. She waved fervently and then tiptoed from the room.

Jen quickly disappeared into the bathroom saying that she needed to freshen up for the flight, an announcement that Elise rolled her eyes at. In her sister's absence, Elise tried to be of use and attempted to extricate Jen's ginormous suitcase from her room noiselessly, a task that proved almost impossible. She loaded the monster of a bag into the elevator along with herself, and prayed that the elevator would handle their combined weight, before recalling the numerous that Fran and Alyssa's none too light luggage had successfully been transported in the lift.

Elise managed to make it down to the ground floor and out the front door with Jen's suitcase before Charlie obtained it from her and loaded it into the car boot. Hill, who looked as pristine as ever, opened the limo door for her. She climbed in and found herself seated beside a rather grumpy
looking Darcy. It was not too long before Charlie and Jen joined the pair in the back of the limo. It was at that point that Elise felt slightly guilty for perhaps ruining Charles and Jenine's goodbyes, but she knew that what she needed for peace of mind was to say goodbye to Jen 'properly'.

When they arrived at the airport, Elise dragged Darcy along with her in search of coffees as Bingley accompanied Jenine to the check-in counter, such that the pair could say their goodbyes.

Jenine looked at her bodyguard mournfully. "I almost wish you were coming too…" she said, her blue eyes wide and her expression downcast. Bingley noticeably perked up at this comment was just about to interject when Jenine continued, "But I know this is the best thing to do. These next few weeks will fly by and hopefully it won't be too long 'til I'm back in town. Hopefully… hopefully you'll still be around…?" she added, hesitantly.

Although once more looking forlorn, Bingley nodded his head with zeal, not wanting his 'angel' to doubt for a moment the delight he took from her company.

"I know you'll be far away, and that there will be a huge time difference and everything, but you'll be in touch, right?" Charles questioned uncertainly.

The middle-aged man in the queue behind them who, bored out of his mind, had been listening for the entire duration of their conversation, snorted rather loudly at that very moment due to the ridiculous uncertainty of these two people, when he was quite certain (and they, in his opinion, should have known for certain) that they both had feelings for each other.

Charles glanced around at the man briefly, wondering if he was alright, before turning back to his charge and looking at her questioningly.

"Of course I will, Charlie. I'll be sure to keep you up to date on what I have each meal of the day and on any funny little stories about my kids," she replied, smiling at him.

He returned her smile warmly and quickly wrapped his arms around her. She returned his hug and looked up at him contentedly. He leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her forehead, before releasing her so that they could advance in the moving queue.

"Do you want some coffee?" Elise asked Darcy as she waited in line. When he didn't reply, she turned to find him mid-yawn, one hand over his mouth and the other stretched up above his head, such that she could see a sliver of tanned skin just above his jeans. She quickly checked herself, and looked back up to his face, relieved when she noticed his eyes were scrunched closed.

Darcy finished his rather theatrical yawn and then shook his head at Elise, who was looking at him expectantly.

She registered his answer and turned back around. Darcy, who was standing a short distance behind her, decided to close the gap and moved closer. Unfortunately for him, another question occurred to Elise at that very moment and she spun around quickly, in the process, smacking him in the face with her ponytail. He grunted and then rubbed the side of his face where he had been hit.

"Oops, sorry! Um, do you think Charlie wants coffee?"

"Uh, I doubt it. He's not really a huge coffee fan…" Darcy responded.

"Well, I don't want coffee right now… I want to get to sleep as soon as I get home. And Jen doesn't really drink anything other than tea…" Elise continued, ignoring the unimpressed look on Darcy's face. "You know what, I'll just get her some tea."
"She's going to have to drink that tea pretty quickly because she'll have to get rid of it before she goes through security," Darcy advised.

"Oh damn, I didn't think of that. You're right…"

"What'll it be?" the barista asked as Elise found herself at the front of the queue.

"Oh…uh… I think we're ok here actually!" Elise said, giving the barista a perfunctory nod before trying to extricate herself from the line as rapidly as possible. Darcy followed suite, annoyed with the strange looks he was being given by the people in the line behind him and the barista.

"Well, that was sufficiently embarrassing," Darcy stated sardonically.

"Yeah, whatever. It's not like coffee was the point of that excursion anyway," Elise retorted.

"If coffee wasn't the point of your trip to the coffee shop then please, enlighten me, what was?" her bodyguard asked.

"The whole point was to give Jen and Charlie some Jingley time," she announced.

"Jingley time?"

"Jen and Bingley time. Jingley time."

Darcy blinked at her. "Did you just come up with that right now?"

"I did, actually!" Elise replied, grinning at him, such that Darcy couldn't help but laugh.

They found their way to Jen and Bingley, who were standing a few feet from the entrance to the security, with Jen's head rested on Bingley's shoulder.

"I should probably head in," Jenine announced. She moved towards Darcy and reached out to shake his hand. "It's been really nice getting to know you, and hopefully I'll see some more of you with Charles when I get back."

"Yup, take care Jenine," he replied smiling almost warmly at her.

Jen turned and gave Charlie a hug, and Elise and Darcy stared off into the distance at nothing in particular as he gave her a quick peck. The two men then hung back as Elise walked her sister right up to the barrier.

Darcy looked and saw hugs exchanged, and Elise imparting some serious-looking advice to Jen, who was nodding warmly.

He turned to his sad-looking friend. "So, how long until you head off after her?"

Charles snapped his head away from his 'angel' to respond. "My flight's tomorrow afternoon. Mr. Bennet seemed to think she'd be fine for the flight and I think whoever's picking her up at the other end has been asked by him to watch over Jen until I get there."

"So, you'll be seeing her in not too long?"

"Yeah," Bingley responded glumly.

Uncertain of what to say when he thought Bingley was, in fact, making the wrong decision but also felt it was too late for his friend to now back out and simultaneously not wanting to interfere, Darcy
settled for a manly pat on the back, which Bingley acknowledged with an appreciative nod.

They watched as Elise gave her sister one final hug, before Jen disappeared off, following the queue of people behind the barrier, turning every so often as she went to see Elise waving at her from afar. When they lost sight of Jenine, Elise stood there for a few minutes extra before re-approaching the two men. Charlie and Elise exchanged sad looks, and Darcy gave his friend another sympathetic manly back pat. He then wrapped one arm around Elise's shoulder to give her a semi-hug when he noticed her eyes looking a tad too watery for his liking.

They all climbed into the backseat of the limo once more and Darcy soon realised his companions weren't actually going to be much company. Charlie was staring out the window vacantly and Elise was very rapidly fast asleep and drooling on his shoulder.
Sunlight streamed through the large French windows and fell upon the face of a heavily slumbering man. At first, he slept in, but as the sun rose higher on the sky and shone brighter on his skin, the man began to stir.

Darcy flailed about, only very slightly awake, trying to block out the unwelcome rays. In doing so, he managed to bang his elbow against the wooden headboard of his bed. He growled in annoyance and sat up, squinting. He shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand and looked at the clock beside his bed. Nine o'clock was none too early, but having only gone to sleep some 5 hours prior, he was unwilling to wake up. He flopped back down on his bed theatrically, rolled onto his front and pulled the duvet over his head.

Try as he might, he couldn't seem to get back to sleep, even though the pain in head was telling him he could do with some more. The bright sun and the sound of movement from the next room was not helping. It sounded to Darcy like Charlie was deliberately walking into their furniture, what with all the bangs and curses he was hearing. He grizzled as he heard something fall and Charlie yet out a rather effeminate yelp, and thumped his headboard in annoyance. It turned out that that was a rather silly thing to do, as it seemed the hard wood had hurt him more than he had hurt it.

There was a loud rap on Darcy's door. Darcy flung the duvet off himself and sat up, ready to tell Bingley to sod off, but before he could manage, his friend had barged in and begun speaking.

"Dude, do you have any duct tape? Or masking tape? Just any tape really?"

"No." Darcy didn't bother to elaborate further, but rather squinted at Bingley and flopped back down on the bed, pulling his pillow over his head. Charles, the harmless soul that he was, took no offence whatsoever. He muttered something about asking Elise and then closed the door gently returning to the danger zone that was his room.

Darcy was just drifting back to sleep again when he heard the doorbell ring loudly. He then heard some muffled banging and cursing as Charlie rushed to the door, stumbling over his packing over the way. He pulled his pillow down more tightly, ignoring the fact that he was on the verge of suffocation in his quest for more sleep.

"Hey Charlie!" Elise greeted chirpily as Charles opened the door to her. "I brought you something to help with the packing," she announced, handing him a large roll of duct tape, a pair of scissors, a roll of bin bags and couple of markers. He accepted the materials with both gratitude and relief. He turned around to move back inside, and Elise followed him, raising her eyebrows at the clutter and nimbly managing to avoid bruising her shins. "It's weird to think you're going to be disappearing soon. Do you know where your next job is?"

"Uh, gosh it'll be really far away from here actually," Charles responded, not wanting to lie, but unable to admit the truth.

"Wow, so like the other side of the country then?"

"Feels more like the other side of the world!"

Elise chuckled, amused at what she thought was exaggeration. Feeling awkward, Charles turned and began shuffling things about. Elise realised she was getting in the way and deemed it time to admit her actual purpose in visiting.
"Um... Is Darcy around by any chance?" she asked, blushing slightly at the memory of him gently waking her and helping her out the limo when they had arrived home the night before.

Charles raised his eyebrows at her heightened colour, but quickly forgot to think more about it when he noticed his boots over Elise's shoulder, waiting to be packed away. "Uh, he's in his room, I think."

Elise's moved in that direction, and just as Charles heard the click of her opening the door, he recalled Darcy's less than pleasant mood a few moments too late.

"GOOD LORD-" Darcy began, sitting up, ready to bite Charlie's head off, when he notice the much more petite figure of Elise is his doorway. She had jumped back in shock at his outburst. "Oh, sorry. I thought you were Bingley," Darcy said, grumbling. Elise didn't move, not wanting him to shout again. Darcy realised he wasn't going to be getting any more sleep but not yet ready to leave bed, he decided it would be better to just call her over. "Come in," he said, waving her over. "Sorry, I'm just a little bit pooped after being up so late last night."

"Yeah, that's pretty understandable. I think I'm going to need a nap later on," Elise agreed as she entered his room. She scanned the vicinity for somewhere to sit, but the one chair in his room was piled with clothes, so she just approached the end of his bed and stood there uncomfortably.

"Are you heading out?" Darcy asked. Elise shook her head. "Oh, what's up, then? Sit down," he demanded, patting the other side of his bed. She took his offer and slipped off her shoes before sitting cross-legged beside him. As she did so, she suddenly registered his lack of a shirt, and quickly looked him over appreciatively, unable to resist and hoping he didn't notice.

He did.

Holding back a smirk, he schooled his expression so that when her eyes were on his face once more, he was looking at her expectantly.

"We're moving out," Elise announced.

"Huh?" Darcy asked, his eyebrows moving together.

"Very long story short," Elise said, not wanting to bring up her supposed engagement to Nicoll, "I've decided I want to live in my own place. Spread my wings and all that jazz."

"Is everything ok?" Darcy asked, slightly concerned at what seemed like a very sudden decision.

"What? Oh, yeah. Everything's fine. It's just that I feel a need for my own space, and now that Jen's gone I guess there's less of a pull to be at home and stuff."

Darcy nodded understandingly. "Fair enough. Does this mean we're going to have to go apartment hunting again?"

Recalling his incessant questioning and his general finickiness, Elise shook her head quite aggressively. "Ugh, I really don't think I want to deal with all that again. This is only going for be rented for a few months, so I don't think we need to be quite so..." she hesitated, trying to come up with a term that didn't sound too negative, "...picky. I looked up a few online and I found one that seems to be going for a really good price that's not too far from here. I thought I'd just show it to you quickly."

"Sounds good."
"Er, do you have a laptop?"

Darcy nodded. He finally removed himself from bed and turned to retrieve it from on top of the desk. Elise admired the pleasant view of his back dimples while he was faced away from her. Darcy sat back down on the bed, placing his laptop on his thighs and stretching his feet out in front of him. He pressed the power button, as watched the screen returned to life. His eyes widened slightly as he took in the page in front of him and Elise moved closer to look at this screen, narrowly missing seeing whatever had startled him as he had just closed the window. It had looked like a Facebook page to her, but she hadn't managed to catch whose.

Darcy breathed a small sigh of relief, glad she had not caught him Facebook stalking her.

He opened up a new tab and passed her the laptop. "Here you go," he said, placing it on her lap.

"Thanks."

Darcy watched as she opened up an estate agents website and typed into it, bringing up the page of a 2 bedroom apartment going for what seemed to him an absurdly low price, considering its location. She quickly brought up the images of the property and showed Darcy.

"So this place, I think, looks pretty amazing. It's got a good location, not too far out, 2 bedrooms, one bathroom and check out these photos!" she said, flicking through each of the pictures.

Darcy had to admit that the place looked really good. It was listed as being fully-furnished, and the furniture in the pictures looked to be in good state. There was a large leather couch in the living room with a sturdy looking coffee table. One of the bedrooms had a large double bed while the other, which was slightly smaller, had a single. He assumed that would be his room if they got the place. He didn't really mind, the room although smaller did not seem small at all and the bed looked pretty comfy.

"It looks pretty good," he admitted and Elise smiled at him.

"I know!" she responded, sounding pleased with herself.

"You won't miss it? I mean... miss being at...home?" he asked quietly.

"Home?" she repeated, sounding puzzled. "No... I guess not. But then I don't really feel that home pull to this place. It's my Dad's place- like, I don't get that funny feeling in my tummy when I have to leave, you know?"

"Ugh yeah, I hate that feeling. So where do you feel like is home for you? With your mom?"

"What? Oh gosh, no. I mean I love my mom, obviously, but she's kind of a nomad anyway. I don't think she even has somewhere she feels is home. Although I dare say for her, those home feelings are now more tied to a person than a place. And Edouard, her husband, goes where she does. I feel sad when Mom leaves but I think I've come to terms with her being... free-spirited," she smiled.

"What about you? Where do you get the home tingles from?"

"Uh, I guess I get them whenever I leave my Mom's childhood home in England. That's where my sister lives right now," he explained.

"Why don't you live there, then?" she asked before realising that sounded a bit rude. "Not that I'm trying to send you away or anything," she corrected herself, "just wondering."

He chuckled, "In all honesty I've never actually live there," he said, looking up to see her surprised
"My family used to spend summers and Christmas there and my cousins would often join us. Time there was something I really looked forward to as a kid," he sighed. "Georgie, my sister, just moved there full time pretty recently. I guess lately I've been feeling like there's less of a hold on me here... and there feels more like... home."

"I kind of wish I had that with someplace," Elise sighed.

"You don't feel that way about anywhere?"

"No, not really. I mean I miss Mom and Jane a lot when they're away. And Dad too, but, um... uh he's pretty distant even when he is around I guess. I miss Marissa too and Carla and JW, but my attachments are all to people rather than to a place that I call home."

"I know what you mean. To be fair, a lot of my attachment is based on my sister being there."

"You guys are close, then?"

"Yeah. She's my baby sister, you know?" he said with a half smile. "She's been through some tough times lately as well."

Elise's brow furrowed. "What happened? Is she alright?"

"Well-

There was a rap at the door before Charlie entered the room. His eyebrows shot up at the sight of Darcy and Elise sat close together on the bed in the unlit room. As neither of them seemed to find their closeness peculiar or attempt to disguise it, he quickly tempered his surprise.

"Hey guys, this is me pretty much all packed up," he announced.

"Wow! Already?" Elise was surprised that he was already done considering the state of the living room when she had arrived.

He laughed, "Well, I've been at it for a while!"

"So, are you off to the airport?" Darcy asked, his eyes widening imperceptibly when he realised Charles may not have wanted him to disclose that information in front of Elise. He was relieved when Charles didn't even bat an eyelid.

"Yup, taxi should be here in 10."

"Taxi? Charlie, why don't you go with Hill?" Elise asked.

At that point Darcy noticed Charles becoming more uncomfortable. "No, no, it's fine. I don't want to trouble him and I have quite a lot of stuff." Darcy realised that in reality Bingley didn't want to risk Hill seeing what flight he'd be getting on.

Elise looked at him, unconvinced. "Are you sure?"

When Charles nodded vigorously, Elise decided to let it go, thinking that perhaps he didn't want to be seen in the rather ostentatious limo.

Charles approached the bed, to say his goodbyes to the two. Elise removed herself from the warmth and stood. Charles gave her a quick hug and a peck on the cheek.

"Take care of yourself," she told him.
"You too," he smiled. "Well, actually you have Darcy, he'll take care of you." Charles grinned.

Hearing his phone buzz, Charles announced that his taxi must have arrived. Darcy peeked out the window and saw it parked right outside the guesthouse. He helped Charles move his suitcases and boxes and load them into the car, while Elise watched from Darcy's window. Once Charles was all set, Darcy gave him a hug and a manly back slap.

"I'll miss you, bro," Darcy stated.

"Are you tearing up?" Charles teased. When Darcy elbowed him, Charles laughed. "Nah, I'm just kidding. I'll miss you too man."

"Take care of yourself, okay? Don't get into too much trouble and call me if you need anything. Also do me a favour and text me when you get there so I know you're ok," Darcy demanded.

Charles grinned "Yes, mom. Don't worry I'll be in touch. I'm probably going to screw this up and need your help real bad. Anyway, you take care of yourself, and your girl too." Bingley climbed into the car and Darcy shut the door for him. The taxi began to move and Darcy waved his friend off.

Elise, after witnessing the hug and manly back slap combo between the two friends, had climbed back into bed with Darcy's laptop. She was fairly certain of her choice in apartment and quite frankly could not be bothered with doing any more in depth hunting. She decided in the mean time, to leave Darcy a present. She opened the photobooth program and took a photo of herself making a kissy face. Satisfied with the ridiculousness of the photo, she set it as his desktop background.

When Darcy returned to her, he climbed into bed and she climbed out. "I've made the decision. This is the place I'm going with."

"Ok," Darcy accepted, although really he was not entirely convinced. The pictures looked good, the price looked good, the place looked good. Still though, Darcy was not one for spontaneity. At all. Elise's quick decision just did not sit well with him. He realised though, that it was not his place to interfere. This would be for a short time, everything looked good about the place online, he tried to reassure himself.

"I'm going to call the landlord so we can go sign the papers today," Elise announced before retrieving her phone and wandering into the living room to talk.

Darcy picked up his laptop. When he noticed his new wallpaper, he couldn't hold back a snort. He chuckled and shook his head. He contemplated changing it, but decided he rather liked the new background.

Several minutes later Elise re-entered the room. Darcy turned his screen to her.

"Now this," he began, gesturing at the wallpaper, "this is attractive."

Elise shrugged at him. "What else could you expect from me?" she asked with mock conceit.

They shared a grin.

"Ok, so the landlord said she'd had a lot of interest in the place. I said we wanted it and she said we could come over to her and sign the papers today!"

"To her?" Darcy asked, looking suspicious.

"Yeah, her baby's sick or something so she can't leave. Her place is actually not too far away."
"You don't want to see the place before you sign the papers?" Darcy asked, trying not to sound incredulous.

"I did ask, but she said she really couldn't leave what with the sick baby, so if we wanted to see it before hand we'd have to wait a couple of days. She then said that there were pictures online. Those are the ones we've seen and they look pretty good, so I think we might as well just sign," Elise explained.

"Uh huh," Darcy replied, really not at all keen on the plan.

Elise now knew him well enough to recognize his unimpressed state, but ignored him.

"Ok so come on, get dressed," she demanded, eying his delightful thorax one more time. "I'm going to head over to the house to grab my purse and stuff, I'll meet you out front. Hill can drop us off." She turned and exited. Darcy slowly rose and muttered under his breath about not taking the proper precautions and being too spontaneous before hunting for a shirt he could wear.

"Oomph!" the tall man quickly regained his balance and swivelled around to see who had collided with him. He found himself looking at a petite (or she would have been, without the six inch heels) redhead who was bending to adjust the shoe-stilts she was wearing when he had knocked her off balance.

She stood back up and pushed her hair out of her face to reveal a sneer, but when she took in the face of the man she was looking at, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Charlie? What are you doing here?"

Charles Bingley had the expression of a deer in headlights. He was at a loss as to what to respond. Aside from Darcy, David Bennet and his mother, for he was a mama's boy, nobody had any idea where Charlie was heading. In actuality, his mother didn't even know that he was headed to China, all she knew was that he was headed to the far east for a job, that he would be in touch and that he would be back in the states in time for her birthday. He knew Jen would be hurt when she found out he had trailed her without her knowing, and she would indeed be finding out, because he had decided that he would have to tell her before their 'relationship' became any more serious. He also knew that if Jen found out that everyone else had known about him trailing her, she would be even more hurt at being left out of the loop.

So it was, that Charlie stared at the woman blankly for several seconds before she squealed and clapped her hands and pulled the boarding pass he held from his fingers excitedly.

"Beijing! Wow! Charlie that's really far away! What are you going to do over there? Oh! Let me guess! You're bodyguard to a multimillionaire? To Angelina Jolie? That is just too exciting!" she squealed, not even waiting for him to respond fully.

Charles let out a false laugh. "My lips are sealed," he announced, making a show of zipping his lips. "Where exactly are you going, Carrie? Don't you have class?"

His cousin gave him a dazzling smile. "Nope! I'm on spring break and I'm going with some of my girls to Mexico!"

"Wow! Mexico? You must really have been saving from your hotel job!"

"Nope! Daddy said he thought I'd been really studious this semester and he decided to treat me to this holiday!" she responded, beaming.
"That's really great!" Charlie said over the sound of his flight being announced. "Oh look, that's me boarding! I guess I'll see you when we're back, Carrie," he said, giving her a quick peck on the cheek before making his escape with brisk strides. For once, Charlie's face was without a smile. He was more than a little displeased at this coincidence. He was relieved though that Carrie hadn't pressured him more about his purpose in China. The secrecy was weighing on him greatly, and the more focused on it he became, the more it seemed like his secret needed protection. It was becoming a vicious cycle.
"Elise, are you sure this is a good idea?" Darcy asked for the four hundredth time.

"Yeeeees, how many times are you going to ask me this, Darcy?" Elise responded huffing out a breath exasperatedly.

"It's just that I don't think this is a very rational decision! Why would you not look at the place first?"

"We've seen the pictures online!"

"And I've seen pictures of George Bush's bikini body online and let me tell you there is no way his tits look like that in real life."

Elise rolled her eyes. "Right… and, tell me, Oh Expert On Edited Internet Pictures, did those pictures of the apartment look doctored to you?"

"That's not the point. The point is that they could have been and that it is extremely dodgy that the lease isn't even being signed at the apartment."

"She has a sick baby, Darcy! Have a heart!"

It was Darcy's turn to roll his eyes. "Elise, exactly how much experience do you have in apartment hunting?"

"I'll have you know, I have enough! I was apartment hunting in San Diego when we visited."

"Yes, and I was the one asking all the important questions."

"I suppose that's what you were doing if asking all the important questions is the same as being anal retentive."

Exasperated, Darcy covered his face with his hands. "Ugh, Elise. I'm just trying to help you!"

"Yes, that's brilliant, Darcy, but I didn't ask for your help!" she replied, sounding slightly shrill. "You're supposed to be body guarding, not soliciting. Can you please just do that instead?"

Darcy's jaw tightened as he closed his mouth, resolving to let Elise stew in her own mess, a mess which he was certain she was about to dive headfirst into. He was more than mildly offended that she thought of him as nothing more than an employee. He had recently begun to feel a sense of camaraderie between them, but it seemed Elise did not feel the same.

"Hill, why have we stopped?" Elise asked, suddenly noticing the limo hadn't moved for several minutes.

"We're at the address you gave me, Little Miss. In Highland Park."

"Oh," Elise responded dumbly, suddenly glad she hadn't opted to drive there herself. To begin with she surely would have had a crash what with Darcy's incessant complaining and on top of that she had no idea where they were and would have been completely unable to find her way around this area.

Before long, Hill was at Elise's door, helping her out. Darcy soon joined her on the pavement. They walked up the short driveway and rang the bell of the house they were in front of.
A stocky woman who seemed to be in her late 30s answered the door.

"Can I help you?" she asked, looking at them slightly puzzled.

"Um, hi, Mrs Phillips?" Elise asked.

"Yeah, that's right I'm Natasha Phillips," she responded, nodding assuredly.

"Oh we're here about the property you're letting near Vernon?"

"Oh! Right, the two bedroom apartment?"

"Yeah, that's right!" Elise nodded. "I spoke to you over the phone earlier."

"Yes, that's right, I remember now. Why don't you come inside and we can start sorting things out?" she asked, moving from the doorway and leading them into the house. Darcy nearly tripped over several stuffed animals and plastic telephone on his way in. Elise noticed his disgruntled appearance and rolled her eyes, while subtly shaking her head, resulting in her almost tripping over a model car.

"Sorry, the place is a bit of a mess. My kid's been sick as I told you on the phone, and it's just been really hectic and crazy," Mrs Phillips explained.

"Oh dear! That must be really tough!" Elise responded sympathetically.

"Yeah it's a real pain, honestly," Mrs Phillips replied as she led them into a living room. "Go ahead and sit down," she instructed.

Elise took a seat on the couch and Darcy eyed the floral cushions dubiously in search of baby puke, before finally settling himself beside Elise.

"So, you guys wanted to sign the lease for the apartment?" Mrs Phillips asked.

"Well, actually, we'd really been hoping to see the place first?" Elise asked, ignoring Darcy's triumphant smirk as she asked. She had decided to ask one last time in an effort to appease her soon-to-be housemate, though she was doubtful that the result would be any different.

"Oh, yes I can understand that, but honestly I really can't afford to leave my son today, what with him being sick and all," Mrs Phillips said. "You're welcome to wait a few days until he feels better and I can get out and show you the place, but see, the thing is, I can't make any guarantees that the place will still be available by then. I've had so many people visiting the past couple of weeks, and there's actually another young couple who'd said they just needed to get together the money for the deposit and then they'd be back to sign."

"Oh, we're not a couple," Darcy interjected.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I just assumed!" Mrs Phillips said, looking chastised.

Elise glared at Darcy, annoyed at him for butting in.

"Anyway, the pictures you saw online are very recent photos of the place, and it looks almost exactly like that. Like I said, I'm more than happy to show it to you, but that just won't be possible today! I almost called to cancel you coming here today. Little Benji has just been so unwell."

Elise made a sympathetic noise while Darcy rolled his eyes shamelessly.

The phone rang and Mrs Phillips excused herself and scuttled off to answer it before it woke the
"What?" Elise demanded irritably.

"Nothing, I didn't say anything," he responded collectedly.

"You didn't have to say anything, your grimace is pretty indicative of your thoughts."

Darcy rolled his eyes once more. He was about to retort when Mrs Phillips' footsteps became more audible and her conversation could be heard.

"Yes, actually there's been quite a lot of interest in that apartment. I've actually got a couple here right now thinking about signing the lease." There was a pause as the person at the other end responded. Darcy rolled his eyes as she called them a couple again.

"Oh, right. Yes I can understand but unfortunately I can't make it over there to show you the place right now, but if you want to wait a day or two…?"

"Oh, ok! That's great. Well let me just finish speaking to this couple here right now, and if they're not taking the place I'll call you back and you can come right over!"

Elise sat forward in her seat, looking more resolved.

Mrs Phillips came back into the room still holding the cordless phone in her hand. "Well, that was another lady interested in letting out the place. If you guys have any doubts, I know she'd be happy to go for the place. I don't want to put you under any pressure, but you can understand…"

"That's ok! We'll sign the lease!" Elise interjected.

"Oh! That's great! I'll just go get out all the papers then," Mrs. Phillips said triumphantly, scuttling off once more.

After various documents and cheques were signed, Hill drove Elise and Darcy to their new apartment. The journey was silent, Darcy struggling to keep his expression nonchalant but failing and instead scowling out the window, while Elise glowered at the back of his head.

Hill stopped the car and the pair climbed out. Darcy eyed the building suspiciously but had to concede that from the outside he could see no fault. The green awning at the front of the building looked tacky in his opinion, but aside from that, as far as he could see, the building was sound. Elise pulled out the envelope she had been given from her purse that contained the keys to the house.

"Ours is flat 6," she announced.

"What level is that on?" Darcy wondered aloud.

"Not sure, let's take the stairs so we have a better idea," she instructed.

The pair ascended the stairs and soon discovered that they were to be located on the third floor. Elise walked up to the cream painted door with a gold '6' it and pushed the key into the lock. Unlocking the door, she pushed it open to reveal their new home. It took a bit more force than she had anticipated. The door was stiff and the brown carpeted floor caused friction, inhibiting its movement.

Darcy found himself smirking triumphantly at the brushing sound made by the door against the carpet and the difficulty Elise was facing. He quickly caught himself, however, and schooled his features into disinterest.
When the door finally opened enough to reveal the living area of the flat, two pairs of eyes examined the surroundings warily. Darcy was pleased to discover a largely stain-free brown carpet and unblemished hole-free whitish walls. Looking into the kitchen he saw that the stove and fridge were present although he was most assuredly going to check that they were in fact functioning.

Elise on the other hand was appalled. Where was the gorgeous maroon leather sofa she had seen in the photos online? What had happened to the wooden coffee table complete with a variety of books on Amazonian wild life? Why was there no toaster?

"Oh my god! Where is all the furniture? I'm calling up Mrs. Phillips right now! Maybe someone robbed the place!"

Darcy looked doubtful, but said nothing as Elise rummaged in her massive handbag for her mobile and then started aggressively tapping keys.

She raised the phone to her ear and Darcy could hear the continuous ringing until finally there was the message of an answering machine. Determinedly, Elise tried the number again, and once more was unsuccessful, with there being no answer.

"Let me borrow your phone, Darcy," she demanded.

He acquiesced, although fairly certain she would not be getting a hold of Mrs Phillips in the near future. This time when Elise dialled, there was no ringing and the voicemail message came up straight away. Clearly, Mrs Phillips had shut off her phone.

"ARGH!" Elise roared in frustration. Darcy tried his best to look more sympathetic and less smug. In actuality, compared to the wreckage he had been envisioning the entire time, the reality of their new apartment seemed rather pleasant to him.

"I'm pretty sure this is illegal! We signed a contract! This is a violation!" Elise exclaimed, her face flushed.

Darcy remaining calm patted her shoulder gently. "Here, why don't you let me see the contracts you signed?"

"Why? What are you going to do with them?"

"I've had some experience looking at legal-type paperwork before, just let me see if I can spot anything."

Elise began rummaging once more through her bag and retrieved the envelope containing the various documents. She pushed it at him aggressively, so much so that he feared death by paper-cut.

He began opening the envelope while Elise stared at his hands as if waiting for some miracle to emerge from the envelope. He pulled out the papers and began leafing through, finding the inventory Elise had signed amongst the papers. Reading through it intensely, he couldn't help the look that etched his face as he realised her mistake.

"What?" Elise demanded, "Why are you making that face?"

"Elise, did you read all these papers properly?"

"Of course I did," she replied defiantly. "I read every single stupid clause in the lodger's agreement I signed and I read the entire first page of the inventory, but by the end of it the words 'chair' and 'table' had lost their meaning and it seemed to me that the furniture we needed was listed so I skimmed the
last page. But there was definitely lots of furniture listed on the first page. I mean that maroon leather couch, it was most definitely on that list."

"Yeah, here's the thing though," Darcy replied, pointing at some of the smaller text on the second page of the inventory, "the first page, that you read properly, was the original list of furniture, but if you look at the date here, that must have been the full list last time she rented it out. It looks like her last tenant might have screwed her over a little bit, because the revised list," he said, pointing to a date on the second page, "is noticeably shorter."

Elise's eyes started to well up as her frustration mounted. Now it seemed, as much as she wanted to, she could not blame anyone else, she herself was at fault. Darcy had warned her numerous times about being very careful, but she had been so sure of herself, and so desperate to be rid of Fran. She had headed her father's words of advice about always reading documents carefully, but clearly not well enough. In skimming just 1 or 2 pages out of 20 while carefully reading the rest, she had still managed to find herself in this situation.

She was furious with herself, but at the same time she wanted to punch Darcy for being such a know-it-all. She could see he was trying to help now, but she was annoyed that he had been right to begin with. She was irate with Mrs Phillips, who sooner or later would be getting a piece of Elise's mind. She was still angry with Fran, for driving her out of her own home in the first place. And she was vexed with her father, who seemed to have gotten his own stupid way in the end. He hadn't wanted to her to move out, she had gone against him, and now, it wasn't working out.

Darcy was eyeing her worryedly. He really did not like it when women cried. He was always at a loss as to how to handle it, and usually ended up patting them in what was supposed to be a comforting manner but was more akin to the way one might pat an overly hyperactive dog whose attention he was not desirous of.

Unfortunately for him, Elise was not succeeding in reigning in the tears. His shoulders slumped resignedly, and he reached over to pat her back. Elise, who was less sad, and more furious, was not in the least comforted by his gesture. She gave him an incredulous look, and he quickly retracted his hand fearfully. His enthusiastic patting hadn't worked particularly well in the past, but with Georgie, who was his main source of experience, she usually cried until she was exhausted and then promptly fell asleep, at which point he could carry her to bed quite capably. Elise was throwing him a curveball.

He stood up abruptly. "All is not lost Elise," he said in an uncomfortably formal manner. "We haven't even seen the bedrooms and bathroom yet! It might not be so bad., It's the couch and coffee table obviously missing so far." He started to walk ahead, towards the two doors in front of him.

"And the toaster…" Elise added forlornly.

"Oh. Yes, that too," he agreed.

Opening the door to the room on the left, he discovered it wasn't in such bad shape. There was a double bed, a matching dresser and even a matching nightstand. He didn't notice anything glaringly wrong. He left her to inspect the room, and exited, heading over to the other room on the right. This second room was smaller, but it had been expected, even from the photos online. There was a single bed with a nightstand and a small wardrobe. He expected this would be his room, and while he couldn't claim to be thrilled, he wasn't sorely disappointed either. He turned to find Elise in the doorway.

"See, my room isn't so bad either!" he announced cheerily.
"Your room?" she asked.

"Well, I assumed this room would be mine unless you preferred it?"

Elise sniffed. She felt guilty for not having listened to him and for now forcing him into this less than stellar apartment where he was gallantly offering to take the smaller shittier room.

"Thanks, Darcy," she said softly.

He just shrugged his shoulders in response, pushing past her to inspect the bathroom. Aside from the ducky shower curtain, and some discolouration of the wall tiles, he saw no great issue there either.

He smiled, pleased that he would not have to suffer too much anyway. Couches were not essential to human life! At least they had beds.

Elise couldn't understand why Darcy seemed so blasé. At first she'd thought it was smugness, but on closer observation, although that was probably part of it, he was just being very accepting.

The ringing of their doorbell interrupted her thoughts and she almost had to laugh at its absurdly posh tone. She walked back over to find Hill at the door with what appeared to be her suitcase.

"Hilary packed it for you," he explained. "She knew how excited you were to be moving out, and she thought she'd save you some trouble and allow you to get moved in ASAP," he told her, smiling. Elise sniffled a little and threw her arms around him, while Hill tried to put down her suitcase without getting her toes.

He chuckled, "I'll let her know you appreciated it," he said, misunderstanding her emotional response to be motivated by gratitude rather than by despair.

By this time, Darcy had heard the on goings and had emerged into the living room. He smiled at Hill who was facing him and patting Elise's back gently. He retrieved the suitcase and carried it over to Elise's new room. Coming back to them, Hill stopped him saying "Actually Mr Darcy, Hilary went over to the guest house and found you were largely still living out of your suitcase, so she managed to pack you up pretty easily as well. Your suitcase and a duffel bag are still downstairs, I didn't think I could carry all up at the same time."

"Oh, wow!" Darcy said, surprised and thankful. "I'll go down and get it. Thanks so much, Mr Hill. And please thank Miss Black too, for packing it for me."

He disappeared, climbing down the stairs and spotting his suitcase at the bottom of the stairwell. He easily lifted it up, finding his duffel bag and slinging it over his shoulder as well, and started up the staircase. On the landing of the first floor, he encountered Hill leaving and thanked him once again. Hill waved off his gratitude with a promise of seeing them around. He told Darcy to tell Elise that Betty, Elise's car, was parked downstairs in their parking slot, before sidling off down the staircase.

When Darcy re-entered their apartment, he found Elise sat on the floor, where the couch would have been, staring at the wall in front of her with her phone in her lap.

"I ordered us my favourite takeout," she announced, as he walked past her with his suitcase, carrying it to his room. He grunted his acceptance. "It shouldn't be too long. I'm going to start unpacking," she said.

Darcy nodded at her, and decided to make a start unpacking his few belongings into his new room. It didn't take him long and he decided to go wash up a little in the bathroom. When he emerged, Elise was shutting the flat door. She made her was over to the couch's spot and plonked herself down with
the food. He briefly wondered how long she was going to continue sitting there, on the couchless ground, before making his way over to join her.

They dug in, and with each bite, Darcy noticed Elise seemed to perk up a little. They demolished the boxes of Chinese takeout fairly easily, and the empty boxes were collected into a plastic-bag-makeshift-rubbish bin. Elise leaned back on her hands and patted her tummy contentedly.

"Ok, so I can see you're suffocating trying not to say 'I told you so' so I'm just going to come right out and say it: You were right," Elise admitted, causing Darcy to smirk triumphantly. "Maybe you should forget the body guarding stuff and work with property instead. You're clearly cut out for it."

Darcy's smile turned into a frown. "Are you saying you don't think I'm cut out for being a bodyguard?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all. Look at you with your macho manly man shoulders. How could I imply that?!" Elise joked.

"No, seriously though. Am I doing a bad job?" Darcy asked worriedly.

"Darcy, I was just kidding!" Elise let out a short laugh.

"I know you were before but I'm asking you seriously now, am I worse than all the other bodyguards you've had? Do I do things wrong?"

"Ok, firstly you're the only bodyguard I've had long term and I dunno, to me you seem to be doing fine. I mean you guard my physical person and on top of that you even attempt to guard my financial affairs," she said with mirth. Seeing that Darcy was still frowning, she asked, "Why are you getting your panties in a twist about this?"

"I just needed to know that I was actually properly doing the job I'm being paid to do," he explained. There was a pause during which Elise started to fold her take out box and Darcy nervously rubbed his chopsticks together before abruptly stopping, worried that he was going to start a fire.

"This is my first time..." he began to say and Elise looked up at him, a mildly puzzled expression on her face. "What I mean is, I've never done this before..." Elise continued to look lost.

"What are you trying to say Darcy? So confused right now," Elise asked.

"You're my first job."

"Oh, ok," Elise said unfazed. "I guess I'm a pretty good first job, no crazy gunmen after me or anything."

Darcy chuckled. "I may have had Bingley use a little influence on my behalf."

Elise gasped theatrically "Well, I never! You mean to say you didn't get this job on your own merit? That is outrageous!"

"It's not so bad! Bingley doesn't even have that much influence he just told our boss I was a good guy!"

"He lied on your behalf?!" she exclaimed.

"He didn't lie! I am a good guy!" Darcy announced, looking entirely serious.

Elise giggled. "I'm just teasing, Darcy," she told him, causing him to harrumph.
J.W. looked at his phone, flicking down to triple check the message he was about to send to make sure that it was somehow both nonchalant and purposeful.

'Hey. I know it hasn't been that long- only a few days actually- but I kinda miss you :P Think we can meet up again sometime soon?'

He contemplated adding kisses. He added them. Then he erased them. Then he thought, 'why the hell not?' added them, pressed send and heard the whoosh as the message disappeared off to her phone.

Then, he panicked. He contemplated sending a further explanatory message, or telling her his phone had been stolen or just any other excuse he could come up with, before he heard the chiming of a new message.

Looking down and seeing it was from her, he smiled happily before opening it up and breathing a sigh of relief.

That night, Darcy and Elise settled into freshly made beds.

Elise found that her new apartment, though not at all what she had thought she'd agreed to, was not quite so awful.

Darcy was pleased that none of his worst case scenarios had been fulfilled, and lay contentedly in his new bed, his feet sticking out over the edge just a tad.

Maybe it would all work out. Maybe the apartment would start to feel like home.
Chapter 16

Darcy stood several feet away from Elise. His heart was pounding heavily and there was a lump in his throat. He tried to speak to her but found that his voice was not working. Elise looked stunning, wearing a long green gown. Darcy looked down at himself. He was surprised to find that he too was formally attired. He reached up to his neck and desperately tried to loosen his cravat hoping that with that, he might once again be able to speak. All of a sudden it was raining! Droplets fell on his nose and his forehead. He wiped them away, feeling exasperated.

"Elise!" he cried, but she didn't hear him. "Elise, I love you!"

Still she gave no sign that she had heard.

The rain became heavier and heavier and Darcy desperately tried to make his voice audible.

Alas, it was too late. He watched with anguish as she melted into a puddle on the floor.

"No! The rain!" He heard himself shout.

He ran up to where Elise's remains lay, in a green puddle on the ground. He couldn't hold back his tears as he collapsed to the floor, kneeling beside the puddle and weeping. Suddenly he thought to get the doctor. He stood and started running but he slipped in the puddle and felt himself falling slowly.

Darcy sat bolt upright in bed and shook his head as if to remove the dream from his mind. Far too groggy to make anything of it, he pressed the home button on his phone, saw the early hour and flopped his back down onto the bed. He closed his eyes and clasped his hands together over his chest. He closed his eyes and hummed contentedly, a small smile on his face as sleep began to reclaim him.

Just as his consciousness faded however, a drop of water landed on his nose. He sat back upright and grunted with annoyance. He checked to see if he had been crying, and was relieved to find dry eyes. He then looked up at the ceiling, relieved to see it was still there. When another drop of water landed atop his bed head however, he reached over and switched on his lamp. He looked up again and growled angrily when he noted a small water stained patch above his bed. Angrily he rose from bed, and aggressively, whilst muttering several curses against the apartment, pushed it several metres to the left, so that the patch was no longer above where he lay. He switched off the light and covered himself with the duvet mulishly, determined to sleep some more.

Jenine had been feeling out of sorts lately. She prided herself in usually being calm, collected and incredibly organised, but of late she seemed to be entirely addle-minded. She had been forgetting things all over the place, losing things, misplacing things and for some reason she had found her house keys in the fridge thrice already. She'd diagnosed herself with pre-senile dementia a few nights back with the help of certain online services. When she'd mentioned her situation to Elise, her sister had laughed and pronounced Jenine 'crazy in love'.

Jenine hadn't given any credence to Elise's diagnosis at first. She knew she had feelings for Charles, but she didn't think she was in love quite yet. When she thought about it further, however, she became less and less certain that her sister was wrong.

For starters the other day, she had had dinner with two of her colleagues at a fine dining
establishment, and as she'd walked in through the glass doors, their closing had wafted air into her nose and she'd been startled to find that it smelled exactly like Charles' signature scent. She'd smiled to herself and decided to send him a text while she waited for her colleagues to arrive, asking how he was. She hadn't thought much further on the incident at first.

On top of that, a few days back, she'd thought she'd heard Charlie's voice somewhere in the parking lot. She'd quickly scanned the area, but hadn't seen anyone around. Rolling her eyes at herself she'd gotten into her car and forgotten about the whole thing.

Jenine had been startled by a comment from a student several days prior. As she was teaching English at an international school, she couldn't claim to have the most refined knowledge of the local language, however she had overheard two students talking about seeing a fireman on campus. Jenine was, of course, extremely concerned that there had been some sort of incident at the school. As a result, she'd probed a little and asked the kids about it. One of them announced that it had been very strange and that she'd never seen one before. Jenine nodded encouragingly, but remained perplexed. She hadn't initially wanted to unduly worry the children who seemed largely unruffled, and more fascinated by the sight of the fireman, so it was with some reluctance that she then asked if there had been a fire on campus. One of the kids laughed and announced with great amusement that yes, it was the man's head that was on fire. However seeing his teacher's horrified expression, he had gone on to explain that what they had seen was not in fact a fireman but rather a man with fiery hair. When Miss Bennet's eyes had remained the size of saucers the poor boy had tried to explain that the man's hair was orange jumping and pointing at a poster in the classroom with A is of Apple, B is for Banana, C is for Carrot and much further down O is for Orange.

Once Jenine was sufficiently reassured that there was no actual fire and that no one had been harmed, she actually found the situation somewhat amusing. Clearly gingers were particularly unusual and exciting around the area. She smiled to herself, deciding that this was a story she would include in her next email to Charles. She contemplated with amusement her students' reactions to his hair if she ever brought him into class.

Lately it seemed that Charlie-related things were appearing in all frontiers of her life. She contemplated that maybe she was actually 'crazy in love' before snorting softly and dismissing the idea. She wasn't there quite yet, but maybe she would be soon. She was perfectly aware that she'd only need a little more time with Charlie before she considered him her veritable redhead Prince Charming.

The first night at the apartment hadn't been all that bad, Elise had been relieved to find. Without proper curtains on her windows, the sunlight had woken her considerably earlier than she might have desired. She'd gone to the window and attempted to block out the sun with a towel. It hadn't worked all that well, but really she didn't need much to allow her to get back to sleep.

She had just gotten back under the covers when she heard a thumping against her window followed by a muffled voice. Both irritable and curious, she rose once more to see what it was. She was surprised to see a large ginger tabby perched on her fire escape, his tail flicking up and down. His head was cocked to one side as he studied her with his large green eyes. Elise's inner cat lady made an appearance and she readied herself to open the window and reach out to him. She hesitated for a second, worried that he was a feral cat, but noting that he looked well-groomed and well-fed, very well-fed in actuality, she didn't see the harm.

Opening the window, Elise reached her hand out and made squeaky noises to try to draw him towards her. He sidled over to her hand without any shyness and reached his head down to it. He appeared disappointed that she held nothing for him and batted her hand with his paw. Feeling
guilty, she scooped the big guy up, slightly taken his back by his weight.

Elise now faced a slight dilemma. She wasn't keen to take him to the kitchen and risk Darcy stumbling upon her and the cat if he was awake, or risk waking him if he was still asleep. She chose to leave the cat in her room with the door closed and retrieve him something from the kitchen.

The kitchen was mostly empty. There was no food, and the small amount crockery Hilary had sent with for her was only half unpacked. She discovered in amongst it a shallow plastic Tupperware box. With a lack of other options, she filled it with water from tap and reopened the door to her room, praying her new friend wouldn't try to run out. Elise was relieved when he did not, and chuckled when she spotted him curled on her bed, peering at her through half closed eyes.

She put the water dish on the floor and picked him up off her bed. He resisted, somewhat disgruntled, but quickly settled and even began purring when he was placed in her lap and stroked lovingly. After a short while, he was placed on the floor where he lapped at the water briefly, unimpressed, before jumping back up on to her bed and settling down once more. She smirked as she recalled that her own plan had been to settle back into bed and snooze some more.

Elise let the cat be as she began unpacking what remained of her few possessions still within her suitcase. It didn't take too long but by the time she was done it was clear the cat was contentedly asleep. Deciding not to disturb him, she went ahead and had her shower, relieved that she was spared any awkward moments as Darcy had yet to make an appearance.

Re-entering her room, she found her new friend in exactly the same position she had left him in. She was half dressed when she heard a knocking on her room door.

"Uh…. Just a second!" Elise called out.

"Take your time," Darcy responded sincerely.

Elise scuttled about, pulling out a pair of jeans and quickly brushing her hair. She was about to open the door when she remembered the cat asleep on her bed. Unwilling for Darcy to meet her new friend, she apologetically disturbed the cat's slumber lifting him and plopping him down on the fire escape where she'd found him. He scratched her a little in annoyance.

"I'm so sorry big guy!" she whispered. "If you come back later I might have something for you! Sorry for kicking you out."

He stared back at her unimpressed, but quickly turned his back and disappeared hastily along the fire escape.

Elise rapidly made her way over to the door, banging her shin against the frame of her bed, and cursing in annoyance and with the pain. She rolled her eyes, knowing it would bruise. She opened the door to Darcy, who it seemed was ready and dressed.

"Sorry I took so long Darcy, I was just getting dressed," she apologised.

He blushed slightly, with the memory of the last time he'd seen her undressed coming to the forefront of his mind. "That's okay," he replied, "I was just wondering if you wanted to head out and pick up some groceries?"

"Yeah!" she responded enthusiastically, "that sounds good."

Darcy moved back away from the doorway and she grabbed her coat and left her room to join him in the living area.
"I didn't realize you were up. Have you been awake a while?" she asked.

"Um, yeah, uh, I didn't sleep all that great," he mumbled.

"Oh," Elise responded, with a pang of guilt.

He realised quickly that he might have been hitting a sore spot, and quickly tried to rectify, "No, no, I just mean because, it's sleeping in a new place and all you know?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, I get it," she said, smiling back at him weakly.

Darcy placed his palm on her lower back to guide her gently out of the apartment and Elise flushed at the contact. She turned her face away as he locked their new apartment.

Elise drove them in Betty to the nearest large supermarket branch and Darcy acquired a trolley for them. She was surprised when he put his hand on her arm, causing her to look up at him.

"Um, how are we going to do this?" he asked her awkwardly.

"What do you mean? Have you never pushed a trolley before?!" she asked, looking at him like he'd lost his mind.

"What? No, of course I've pushed a trolley before," he said, rolling his eyes. "What I meant was are we just going to buy separate groceries? Or do you want to just pool everything and split the cost? Or share some essential things like milk and bread and meat?"

"Oh. Right. I don't know, actually," Elise responded, feeling slightly awkward and unsure of what the normal policy was. "How did it work when we were living at Dad and Fran's place?" she asked him.

"Well there was some essential food provided for us in the guesthouse when we moved in, and we weren't there that long, so Bingley and I just ended up doing a small grocery trip the one time," he responded.

His response didn't guide Elise much, so she decided to use a combination of logic and instinct. "Well it seems silly to by duplicate milk and bread and things. Although Darcy, you should know, I don't really consider meat to be an essential."

He huffed and rolled his eyes, "Oh that's right, I forgot about you and your salmon and tuna burgers," he said teasingly.

"Yeah, I should probably warn you, I'm mostly pescetarian," she told him apologetically. "Fish-eater. Like a cat, or something," she explained, seeing his confused expression.

"Ridiculous," he replied with a teasing grin.

In the end, Elise ended up paying for their shared food which included milk, bread, eggs, an assortment of fruit and vegetables and some household cleaning supplies alongside her own things. Darcy paid only for his own things, with the understanding that next time he would pay for the shared items. Elise was very much relieved that in their scheme Darcy hadn't ended up having to pay for her sanitary pads, or anything else humiliating.

Once they were home and the groceries unpacked, Elise and Darcy found themselves sitting on their
kitchen counters just chatting generally about daily life. They agreed to take turns cooking, although Darcy warned that he was in no way Masterchef material. Elise laughed and said she wasn't much better, but she could probably feed them if he didn't fuss too much over the fish.

"Will you not eat meat at all then? Not even chicken?"

"No, no, it's not that. I do eat beef and chicken and such occasionally, it's just not my favourite thing, I guess. I wouldn't normally buy it because generally I don't eat that much of it, but I'm not going to make pukey faces at you if you cook meat for me." She laughed as Darcy dramatically sighed with relief.

It was then that she felt her phone vibrating in her back pocket, wedged between her butt and the counter surface. Hopping off she pulled it out, and checked who was calling, unwilling to ruin her relatively carefree mood by conversing with either her Dad or Fran. Seeing that it was J.W. on her caller ID she decided it was safe to pick up.

"Hello! To what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked, smirking to herself.

"Elise, you wound me. You make it sound like I'm not texting you each and every day," J.W. replied with mock seriousness, although his statement was, for the most part, true.

Elise giggled in response. "So… 'sup?" she asked, putting on a deep voice.

At the other end, J.W. snorted at her silliness. "Nothing really, I just haven't seen you in a while, and I was wondering if you maybe wanted to get coffee and chat?" he asked.

"Oooh, are you asking me out?" she said waggling her eyebrows although he couldn't see. Darcy however heard her question, noticed the waggling and was eying her phone suspiciously.

J.W. laughed. "How does the Starbucks near mine sound?" he asked.

"Sounds good, but since I've moved and all, it's going to take me a bit longer to get there."

"That's no problem," he replied.

"Ok, then," she replied happily, "I'll 'missed call' you when I'm almost there, so you can leave," she told him.

They said their goodbyes, and J.W. said he'd see her soon.

"Looks like we're off again, Darcy," she announced.

"I see. Who are we meeting?" he said somewhat roughly.

"My friend, Jun Wei," she replied. "He wants to grab coffee and catch up," she told him.

"Your friend?" Darcy asked demandingly.

For reasons unknown to even himself, Elise having a male friend did not seem a thrilling prospect to Darcy, although in his own mind he put it down to there being yet another person to protect her from. In all honesty, he was hardly protecting her from anybody at the moment, aside from that one incident with a little excess press. It had become fairly clear to Darcy, especially after discovering his petition to Bingley, that Mr Bennet could be extremely overbearing and overprotective when he wanted.

"Yeah," Elise responded, frowning at him perplexed. She wasn't sure, but Darcy seemed to be acting
a tad weird. "Jun Wei, J.W., Carla Lucas's brother," she announced.

Elise drove them over to Starbucks, and it took a while. She wondered to herself why she hadn't instead suggested a place to meet nearer her. The listened to a variety of music along the way, and they both sang along. In particular, they sang along with great enthusiasm to 'Istanbul'. Elise giggled away at the lyrics and Darcy's deep baritone sung 'it's Istanbul not Constantinople'.

When they finally arrived Elise saw J.W. sitting at a table with only two chairs and realised she'd neglected to tell him she was bringing Darcy along.

J.W. frowned seeing the strange man walk in with Elise, and pondered who he might be.

It was at that point that Elise realised she had put herself in an awkward predicament. She wasn't sure if J.W. remembered catching her googling Darcy, but even if he had let it slip his mind, she was worried hearing the name 'Darcy' again would jog his memory, and quite frankly she didn't want to explain all that to him. Unfortunately, she couldn't get past that by introducing Darcy by his first name either since she still didn't know it. She could have asked Darcy, but her stubborn nature prevented her from giving the satisfaction of knowing she was curious. She decided that she had better check it out on the lease documents later on.

Elise realised though, that she couldn't just act like Darcy wasn't there. She definitely was going to need to explain his presence to J.W. So, after she and J.W. had said their hellos, Elise decided she had better make her announcement.

"So, this is my bodyguard," she explained, jerking her thumb in Darcy's direction. "I think I mentioned to you that Dad was acting a little crazy and over protective," she said, trying to shift focus away.

J.W. stuck out his hand at Darcy, "Hey man, I'm Jun Wei," he said, as Darcy gave him a strong handshake.

"I'm-" he was quickly cut off by Elise asking J.W. about some project of Angelica's before he could finish introducing himself. J.W. was surprised at Elise's abruptness, and wondered what was going on, but decided to say nothing.

Darcy was both hurt and annoyed that she hadn't bothered to introduce him properly, just saying he was her bodyguard, and that she had then cut him off, as if he wasn't even there. Lately they seemed to have formed a tentative friendship, and he was genuinely upset that she was treating him so differently in this man's company. He stayed silent, and sulked slightly as J.W. and Elise continued their conversation about their families, medicine and various inconsequential subjects that he couldn't follow their discussion about.

Elise went on to ask J.W. how Carla was doing. She was shocked at J.W.'s response.

"She's fine. I asked her if she wanted to come along but she seemed to be rushing somewhere and she mutter something about meeting that Nicoll guy."

Elise's eyes widened. "What?" she asked, more than a little perplexed.

J.W. wrinkled his nose contemplatively, "Yeah, she's been hanging out with him a fair bit lately," he stated, "it's kind of weird."

"It's really weird!" Elise replied. "How did she even meet him? And why would she voluntarily spend time with him? Wait. When you saying hanging out, what do you mean?"
"Oh, no, no, I don't mean that they're dating or anything. No way, it's not that. I got the impression that Carla was helping him with his show. Or that he was helping Carla with a show. Honestly she wasn't very clear about it, and you know me, I don't like conflict. I didn't want to start nosing around where I wasn't wanted."

"Ugh, that is really strange," Elise replied. "I'm going to be nosing around when I get the chance to speak to her about it." J.W. smirked at her knowingly.

They chatted for a while longer, before J.W. announced that he had to get going to meet someone. He kissed Elise's cheek goodbye, and was surprised to notice that Darcy was glowering at him. J.W. didn't really know what was going on there, but it definitely seemed like something was up. In an uncharacteristic move, J.W. glared back at Darcy as if daring him to defy him. Elise was completely oblivious to this exchange.

The ride back to their apartment was silent. Darcy was still sulking, and Elise was pretty sure her behaviour had offended him. Honestly, she wasn't surprised, seeing as she had been pretty rude. The problem was that she couldn't for the life of her think of a decent explanation for it.

The next morning, Darcy was once again awoken by water on his face. He was somewhat relieved to note the daylight outside and to realise that it couldn't have been as early as the last time. His relief passed when he noticed that his ceiling was now leaking from a different spot. He ended up shifting all the furniture around in an attempt to find a dry spot for his bed. But when he got back into bed after all the activity of shifting furniture, he soon found that he was no longer sleepy. He pulled out his phone and sent his sister a quick message checking up on her.

He was flicking through his phone contacts, bored, when he heard a mewling sound from outside his window. He opened the curtains to see what he considered a rather plump ginger feline sitting on the fire escape. He opened the window.

"Hey there, big guy," he called out. Darcy was surprised when the cat took his greeting to be an invitation to come indoors. He was even more surprised when the cat quickly settled himself in Darcy's lap. Amused, Darcy smiled to himself and gently scratched behind the cat's ears. The cat tilted his head back, closing his eyes to slits, and purred contentedly.

"You're just like my Jeeves, aren't you, big guy" Darcy said, thinking to the tuxedo cat that was technically his sister's. Like Jeeves, this guy appeared to be a very well fed beast. Although Darcy wasn't worried about the cat's nourishment, he made his way over to the kitchen carrying the cat around his neck, like a boa, and retrieved a tray of water for the cat. He wasn't sure how Elise would react to him feeding some of her canned tuna to his new feline friend.

The cat lapped at the water for a short while before returning to Darcy's lap.

"Sorry I don't have anything better than that for you, Mr Cuddles. I'd give you some milk, but you honestly don't look like you need it. And Georgie always yells at me when I sneak Jeeves some milk. Poor guy has resorted to drinking from my cereal bowl when I'm not paying attention."

Darcy tried to play with the cat for a short while, before giving up, discovering that Mr Cuddles was as lazy as Jeeves. Darcy took a photo of Mr Cuddles with his phone to send to Georgie. He thought she might be relieved to see he had some feline company. In his message, he did however tell her to make sure Jeeves knew that he had not in any way been replaced. He knew Georgie would roll her eyes, especially since she certainly had not forgotten the fuss Darcy had initially kicked up when she had first gotten Jeeves as a kitten.
When after a while, Mr Cuddles spotted a pigeon perched on the fire escape, with stealth that shocked Darcy, he climbed from Darcy's lap out the window to follow it. Deciding he might as well emerge from his room, Darcy went out into the kitchen and decided to make them both pancakes.

It wasn't long before Elise awoke to the appetizing scent of pancakes. She quickly brushed her teeth and hair and joined Darcy in the kitchen still clad in her pyjamas. Noticing her presence, he turned from the stove.

"I made breakfast," he announced. She smiled at him warmly in response, and he grinned back at her.
Chapter 17

Elise moaned with pleasure as she ingested a large piece of a delightful fluffy pancake doused in maple syrup. Darcy openly chuckled at the noises she was making, and she looked up at him defiantly, mouth full of pancake.

"Whath? Ith goomphd," she replied, her mouth still full.

"Yeah, I can taste that it's good in my own pancake," Darcy said. "There was no need to spit your crumbs at me," he admonished, causing Elise to roll her eyes at him.

They ate in comfortable silence for some time, delighting in the joys of thick, fluffy, syrup coated pancakes and orange juice to drink.

"Hey, so, can I ask you something?" Darcy asked, interrupting the quiet.

Elise startled and looked up, her eyes widened with concern as to what his question might be. "Um... Sure?" she replied hesitantly.

"What's the real reason you decided to all of a sudden move out?" he inquired.

Elise snorted, recalling her troublesome family and the various instigators of the move. "Well first of all, my youngest stepsister threw a huge party at our house, let some of her hooligan friends stay in my room, did not monitor them and allowed them to unleash havoc on my prized snow globe collection. She then displayed zero remorse, I didn't even get an apology. Then on top of that, my step mother decided to try to set me up with this really odious man so that we could get married and be a subject for a reality TV show where she could publicise her line of wedding dresses." Elise hardly paused during the speech. Her cool tone masked the anger she felt at the mere memory.

Darcy looked at her, eyes wide, clearly taken aback.

Seeing his expression, Elise felt a little guilty for dumping a fork-lift load of her irritability on him. She calmed a little and went on to explain a bit more logically that these triggers were exactly that. In truth, even aside from these incidents she had had no real desire to keep on living in that house.

"In all honesty, Darcy, I just couldn't see the point in living there anymore, I guess. You may or may not have noticed, but my father is hardly home. While I do feel some sense of affection for Fran and her girls, I'm not close enough to them to put up with their...harassment. I don't really feel a need to live with my stepmother and her kids who I basically lived with for some 5 years... 5 years ago. I moved out for college, and since then, I guess I've really started to value my independence, even without realising it. It's hard to go back you know?"

"I think a lot of people find it hard to live under their parents' roof, even short-term once they've gotten a taste of living alone," Darcy said, nodding.

"Yeah, exactly. And those are often people who are actually quite close to their parents. Don't get me wrong, I love my family, flaws and all. But the affection I have for Fran, engendered by living with her for a relatively short period of my life, isn't really enough to persuade me to go on living with her, especially when her husband, who is actually my father, my flesh and blood and what not, isn't even around."

Darcy nodded again, understandably.
"Is there anything that could entice you to move back in with your parents?" Elise asked, jokingly.

Darcy frowned slightly and looked down at the floor. "Honestly, if that was a possibility, feeling the way I do know, nothing could entice me not to move back in with them," he said. Darcy looked up and saw Elise's puzzled expression. "I lost both my parents in a car accident while I was at college," Darcy explained.

Elise's eyes widened, and she felt tears well in them, both due to her guilt at reminding him of past tragedy, and also because as much as her family tried her patience, losing any of them in such a way would break her heart.

"I am so, so, sorry," Elise said sincerely, a few tears spilling over. "You must think I'm such an insensitive, selfish person, moaning about my family the way I do."

Darcy smiled weakly back at her. "It's fine, honestly. If my parents were still around, I'd probably feel really differently- I'd probably be off gallivanting and living life away from home. Everybody complains about their family from time to time, I certainly did as a teenager. Losing them..." Darcy's voice broke, "Losing them made me appreciate them so much more."

Elise, slid over to him hand wrapped her hands around his waist, physical contact being the only way she could thing to express her sympathy without sounding clichéd or being inadvertently insensitive. Darcy returned her embrace, and stroked her back unconsciously as he thought back to the multitude of happy memories he had had with his parents and Georgie, for which he was grateful.

"My parents were amazing. My dad," he laughed, "my dad could be so serious about some things. Being respectful, being hard-working... those were qualities he demanded in me. But on the other hand, he was such a joker," Darcy said with a fond smile. "The man would wrestle with me on the living room floor, much to my mom's chagrin. And the practical jokes we used to play on each other," he laughed at the memory of the joke chewing gum box he had owned, that would snap right down on your finger as you pulled out a piece of gum.

"My mom was great too. I was always her little boy, even after I went to college. I remember one time she called while I was with some friends in the dorm. I didn't realise my phone was on speaker and she said something like 'Hi, my little man,' when I answered. All my friends heard and of course started laughing and I felt so humiliated at the time," he gave a half smile. "She was so caring though. It used to drive me nuts when she'd call and ask about my day and my week and all my friends, but somehow, even though she'd never met them, my mom could keep track of which friend was which and all the activities I was doing. I felt like I could tell her anything and she'd always support me."

He looked down to see Elise looking back up at him. "I know you don't really have that with your dad, but how about with your mom, are you guys close?" he asked, drawing the conversation away from himself.

"I think I could tell my mom pretty much anything. We've always had quite an honest relationship and all. The thing is that while I could easily talk to my mom about all my worries and have her support, it's hard for that to happen. The last 10 years or so, she's been constantly on the move. When I call her or see her, I know I can tell her anything, but the thing is, there isn't time to tell her everything. I find myself prioritising the things I have to tell her, and as time goes by, I find it harder and harder to tell her some things. Not because I'm reluctant or anything, but just because sometimes the start of a story I want to tell her was six months ago and there's so much back history there, that she's missed."

Elise suddenly looked up at him worriedly, "Mom doesn't... neglect us, or anything," she clarified.
"It's not that she's selfish. It's just that my mom, kind of like me, always had these big dreams, but when the time came for her to achieve them, she had to put them on hold. First, because she was straight of college and didn't have enough savings. Then because she met my dad and went on to have Jen and I. My mom married my dad pretty soon after she graduated, and I think she neglected all her dreams for a long time, so when the opportunity came, she finally had to take it," Elise explained.

Their conversation ceased and they sat in silence for a few minutes, before Elise began picking up their plates and started washing up. "That was quite a heavy breakfast," she said.

Darcy smirked, "it wasn't the breakfast so much as it was the conversation," he replied.

Elise turned from the sink and smiled at him.

"Wanna go explore the neighbourhood in a bit?" Darcy asked.

"That sounds like a great idea. Also, the pancakes used up a lot of our milk. We might have underestimated on that one. If we find a small store we should get some more," Elise determined.

Elise and Darcy wandered around the neighbourhood for some time, trying to get familiar with the area and dodge teenage boys on skateboards. When they stumbled upon a cornershop, they stepped inside.

Darcy announced that he would be buying the milk, so Elise allowed him to wander off towards the dairy section while she browsed the aisles. Spotting a good offer on some cat food, Elise turned, to find Darcy engaged with selecting a newspaper. She quickly picked up a couple of cans, for her feline friend, with whom she was quite taken, and made her way over to the till to pay. When the cans had been rung up, she joined Darcy, who had picked up a newspaper. She was quickly distracted by a magazine cover with her stepmothers name on it. She idly flipped through the pages but almost threw the magazine down when she realised there was an interview with Fran discussing her new line of wedding dresses.

It just so happened that Darcy too passed the aisle of discounted cat food, and seeing Elise distracted, he too grabbed a couple of cans, intending to feed Mr Cuddles in honour of Jeeves, who he missed greatly.

When they returned home, they both succeeded in disguising their cat food purchases from each other. Elise sat on the counter, sending a quick text to Carla, while Darcy plonked himself on one of the chairs at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper.

Elise almost jumped when after a while, Darcy came up to her, his finger pointing to an article he thought she should see. Looking at the title she saw in bold typeface: "Publishing House Procures Bounty of Small Bookstores Statewide".

Reading on, Elise discovered that Darcy had stumbled upon the true reason for her father's sudden concern for her safety. The article detailed how Longbourne Publishings had recently decided to expand their commerce to the book sales as well as publishing. The company had bought out several small independent bookstores that were not thriving in the current economic climate to convert into their own chain, Longbourne Bookstores, which was to start out statewide but there was planning for the venture to expand to be nationwide. Longbourne Bookstores would primarily sell their own publishings, but would also sell other popular books published under other houses.

It seemed David Bennet's enterprise had been met with some serious protests, in particular because
the vast majority of the stores the company had bought out were quaint shops that were valued by the community. Elise herself was upset to learn that two of the new spots for Longbourne Bookstores had previously been frequented by her. One of which, she recalled, had been the bookstore that Darcy had accosted her at soon after they had first met. The other store had been a frequent haunt of hers and J.W.s as the store had a small in built coffee shop at the back where they would go to study, or even just to chat.

It dawned on Elise, that knowing her father and his temperaments, his motive for hiring Darcy as her bodyguard was likely two-fold. The motive he had made more apparent was Darcy's presence for Elise's protection. Mr Bennet's business decisions when it came to Longbourne Publishings had clearly been met with disapproval as well as even outcry and protest in several areas where the bookstores he was buying out were the favourite haunts of many who did not want to see these familiar places turned into yet another commercial chain. Elise knew that her father, who although generally aloof from the family, was well aware of the bookstores she frequented, and new of his daughters preference for a couple of rare small and cosy shops. She had a sneaking suspicion, that the overcautious, overbearing David Bennet intended to use Darcy to keep a tab on his daughter should she choose to push him away when she discovered his intents with regard to Merry Town Books and Netherfields, the two favourite bookshops of hers he was about to take over.

Glancing up from the article, Elise found Darcy looking intently at her face. "This is all news to me!" she announced. She almost rolled her eyes to herself thinking it ironic the way her father was always keen to get her more involved in his company with the hopes of her taking over his role, yet he hadn't even deigned to inform her of what was ostensibly a huge business decision even in the context of her being family, let alone as his desired heir to the company.

"That's probably what the zoo was about that day we ran into all the press," Darcy hypothesised.

"Yeah, probably," Elise agreed. *That and my purported wedding to fricking Nicoll Collins,* she thought to herself.

"Two of these places my Dad's company is buying out are my absolute favourite places to get books. Like Netherfields, that's the place you came and met me that time," she told him, *'when I slammed a book into your nose,'* she added mentally.

"So, are you upset about this whole thing, in that case?" he asked.

"Well, I feel a little sad for the previous owners, I mean I've gotten to know them reasonably well over the years. But I guess if my Dad isn't going to change anything about the essence if those stores, it's not a huge deal to me," she told him. She was however beginning to think that that was an unlikely scenario. Her father seemed to have been keen to avoid telling her about his plans, which was an indication that she was not going to like them. She decided a phone conversation with her father, if she managed to get through, was in order.

After several attempts and some pleading with his secretary, Elise finally managed to get ahold of her father on the phone. They exchanged greetings before Elise made the decision to get straight to the point, a tactic that in general worked best with her father.

"So, I read the paper today," Elise began.

"Well done, Dear," her father replied sarcastically, "I'm delighted to hear that but quite honestly this isn't the kind of achievement you need to phone me and tell me about."

"Ha ha Dad," she huffed. "I read an interesting article. It seems you're going to be selling books as
"well as publishing them?"

"Yes, that's the plan," he replied, not elaborating any further.

"Seems like a good business venture," Elise pushed, wanting him to discuss the subject further.

"It is," was the short and self-assured answer David gave her.

Elise sighed, feeling slightly exasperated. "Seems like a pretty big decision. You never mentioned anything about this to me before," she tried to keep her voice neutral and avoided an accusatory tone.

"You've never taken an interest in *my* company in the past," David replied bitingly, "forgive me for not thinking I needed to run my decisions by you."

Elise knew better than to make a snide comment back and held her tongue. There was a brief silence before she spoke again, "I see Netherfields and Merry Town Books are two of the stores you're buying out... Those are two if my favourite bookstores, you know?"

"Yes, I know."

"Are you going to be changing them much? They're kind of perfect the way they are, you know?"

"We will be making adjustments to the locations we have acquired so that they fit the profile of our company and such that they appear in line with our mission statement," he responded mechanically.

"Does that mean changing the sign on the door or does it mean bulldozing the place and turning it into some a box with shelves, white walls and bright white lights?"

"It means doing what is necessary, Elise! Now, are you done questioning my authority? And the way I run the company? Maybe if you'd ever taken an interest before or made good on my many offers to show you the ropes I would take into account your opinions or preferences. But as it stands you know very little about the world I work in, and I'm not going to base important decisions on the whims of my daughter."

Elise sighed with defeat, knowing now that if she pushed her father further, he was even less likely to consider her opinions and preserve the two locations she held dear. "Yes, Dad," she conceded.

"Is there anything else you need to say? Because I have a meeting to be at," David replied, still sounding incensed.

"No that's fine, you go to your meeting, Dad."

"Bye," was his short response before he hung up unceremoniously. Elise sighed to herself and rolled her eyes.

Not in the mood to do much and far too irritable for polite company, Elise decided to remain shut in her room. She looked out the window to see the sky darkening with the early evening. She was startled when he heard the fire escape rattling but smiled to herself at the sight of her feline friend. Opening the window she scooped him into her arms. The cats' limbs stuck out wildly, his claws visible. He looked mildly displeased.

"Look at you sidling up the fire escape like some rad badass superhero," she said in babtalk or kittytalk, rather. "You're just like Spider-Man aren't you? I better give you an appropriately hardcore name. How about Krull the Warrior King?" she suggested. The cat didn't move, and continued to look at her with an expression akin to a frown on his little face. "I guess not... Hulk?" she put forth.
Again, there was no response. "Spike?" she asked, channeling her inner Buffy fan. The cat meowed at her, most likely in annoyance because he wanted to be put down, but Elise assumed the noise to be a meow of accordance. "Spike it is," she announced.

Elise found an old shoelace lying at the bottom of her wardrobe and attempted to start a game with the cat. He attempted to catch the aglet with his paw a couple of times, but it was half-hearted and he quickly grew bored. As he reclined, stretched out on her bed contentedly, Elise realised that this was the kind of cat where food, and not entertainment, was the way to his heart. It didn't take her long to lay out a little cat food for him. As he spied the plate of provisions, he concluded the nourishment was worth rising for, and with quickness that surprised Elise, pounced to the floor. Elise snorted at his antics, and sat beside him on the floor. Her idle mind soon began pondering the earlier conversation with her father. She found her irritability mounting as she thought on. She was suddenly drawn from her thoughts by the speedy movement of Spike from her bedroom floor, out the window and up the fire escape. She was surprised, but her disbelief was curbed as she noted the empty plate on the floor.

"Oh, I see how it is," she called after him, rolling her eyes. "You take all that I have to offer and then you leave me standing here alone, awash with memories of our time together," she wailed, and then sniffed dramatically for effect. "Seems like everyone's selfish these days," she muttered to herself, thinking on her father once more.

Elise felt a great deal of pent up energy. Angry with her father but unable to voice it to him further, and in the absence of a suitable punching bag (either literal or figurative) she could think of but one way to release some of her frustration.

Grabbing her earphones and plugging them into her iPod, she selected a song she deemed both feel-good and also empowering, cranked the volume up to full and got her groove on. Jumping around her bedroom and flinging her arms wildly, Elise allowed the words of the pop anthem warm her. She chanted the words "I don't care!" whisper-shouting them into her empty room. She allowed her frustration to leave her body as her energy left with each exuberant movement. At one point, she punched the air so forcefully that she dislodged the audio jack of her headphones from the slot in her iPod. As the noise in her ears abruptly ceased, Elise became aware of a knocking at her room door, which by comparison to her music, seemed muted.

Breathing heavily, Elise went to open the door.

"Hey," she said slightly breathlessly, as she saw Darcy standing there.

"Hey," Darcy responded slowly, taking in her flushed appearance and her eyes, which sparkled from her recent exertion. He had to hold himself back from reaching out to stroke her rosy cheek.

Realising that he was standing in her doorway like fool, he stuttered before starting to speak. "Uh… I thought I heard you moving your furniture around… I wondered if you needed a hand?" he asked hesitantly.

"What?" she asked confused. It took several moments before she realised that he was referring to the sounds of her solo dance party. "Oh! Yeah, I was just moving my… nightstand."

"Oh. So you don't need a hand?" he asked.

"Nope, I'm all done."

Looking over her shoulder he peered into her room. "But… it's still in the same place?" he said
questioningly, a discombobulated expression on his face.

"I…uh, I changed my mind," she responded unconvincingly.

"Right," replied Darcy, his puzzled expression still in place.

"Yup," she replied concisely.

"Well, I'll leave you to it then," was his uncertain response.

Shutting the door in his face, she shook off her embarrassment before plugging in her headphones once again and pressing play. She began her movements again, as the song blared.

Elise was suddenly aware of a human presence in front of her. Pulling her headphones from her ears, she was mildly surprised when the music didn't stop and she found herself face to face with Darcy. His face sported a wide grin, which exhibited his deep dimples.

Darcy was surprised when after Elise's door had closed, he heard the song I love it once more, accompanied by a fairly loud thumping noise. Thinking her to be too stubborn to ask for help moving her furniture, he'd determinedly opened the door of the room. He had been shocked to find his charge spinning around to the music and whipping her long hair about her.

He'd approached her slowly so as to avoid being whacked by her flailing arms. When she suddenly stopped and looked up at him, bewildered, he had been unable to hide his mirth, and broke out into guffaws.

"Shut up," Elise had whined-childishly.

"That's not what I call moving furniture," he said between chuckles, "exactly what was that?" he asked.

"A solo dance party," Elise announced pouting petulantly. "You haven't lived until you've had one," she declared, flouncing off to place her iPod and unconnected headphones on her nightstand.

"I'll take your word for it," he said placating her, before cracking up with laughter once again.

Elise, not one who denied herself the pleasure of finding amusement in her own actions and certainly not one to resist the charm of a pair of dimples in a handsome face, soon found herself laughing at her own silliness alongside him.
"This is fucking ridiculous!" Darcy grumbled angrily.

Over the last few nights, the dripping from his ceiling had continued to wake him up, and it seemed that no matter where he moved the bed the leak still managed to get him.

In a moment of inspiration he’d had the idea to cut up a variety of plastic bags, which he then taped over the various damp points on the ceiling of his room. But even that had failed him.

It just so happened that enough water had collected in the plastic that coincidentally happened to be above his head, causing it to overflow and dribble down on to his slumbering face, waking him up once again. Darcy had mentioned his problem to Elise, and between the two of them they’d both called Mrs. Phillips umpteen times, neither being deigned with a response. Her answering machine was surely full of messages from the pair.

Had the leak been generated from their own apartment, Darcy would have happily called a plumber to fix it, but it was clear to him that the leak was due to an issue with the apartment upstairs and the flooring/ceiling between the two flats. He had even been to speak to their upstairs neighbor, but the man who answered the door had spoken to was disgruntled at being woken up (at 2 in the afternoon, at that) and was entirely unhelpful. In the end, he’d announced gruffly to Darcy it wasn’t his problem and that he wasn’t going to stop showering on his behalf. Darcy had bitten his tongue to hold back from commenting on the fact that he doubted that the man showered on anyone's behalf at all.

After a sixth night of disturbed sleep, Darcy was pretty fed up. After muttering to himself for a little while longer, he firmly decided that he was going to sleep on the couch. It took him wandering to the living room and stumbling around in the dark for him to realise that they still didn’t have a couch.

This was in part due to stubbornness on both his and Elise’s part. Both of them had been insistent that they should have been provided with ample furniture, and so instead of purchasing one themselves, this was the basis of the second reason for their many calls to Mrs Phillips. Seeing the empty space before him, Darcy groaned out loud at his own mulishness.

Meanwhile, Elise’s sleep cycle was gradually improving. She had been sleeping a full 8 hours the past few nights, and her hatred for their apartment (and Mrs Phillips) was diminishing, though at a very slow rate.

Darcy was absolutely fed up of moving his ‘stupid uncomfortable bed’ around the room in order to avoid the leak only to be awoken anyway. It wasn't as if the bed was all that comfortable without water falling on his face.

’I might as well be sleeping in the shower,’ he thought to himself sarcastically. The idea however, planted itself in his brain, and Darcy realised that in fact, he might actually be better off doing just that.

Heading over to the bathroom, he switched on the lights. He made his way over to the bathtub and skimmed his hand over its inner surface, checking for moisture.

’Pretty damn dry! Drier than my mattress anyway,’ he snorted quietly. He went back to his room, retrieved some of his bedclothes, scooping them up into his arms. He looked very much the part of a child who had had a nightmare, sneaking over to their parents' room to sleep. Darcy prepared a vaguely comfortable looking bed for himself in the bathtub, patting down layers of sheet and duvet. He had placed the duvet on the bottom, to add some padding to his nest, and decided to use the sheet
He turned the bathroom light off and plodded over to the tub once more. Climbing in, Darcy discovered that aside from having to sleep in fetal position, as his legs were too long, and having his neck turned at a slightly awkward angle, which was sure to result in a crick tomorrow, his bathtub-bed was not all that uncomfortable. It took about 5 minutes, but Darcy managed to fall asleep, pleased that the showerhead hadn't dripped on his feet at all.

Elise for the first time in several days, stirred from her sleep. Her eyes soon opened, but only half conscious she simply rolled over and made an attempt to go back to sleep. Normally, she would have succeeded in her endeavor, but the built up pressure in her lower abdomen told her that she would have to pee before she could get back to sleep again. Still not entirely coherent, she padded over to the bathroom and switched on the light.

Darcy, who had succumbed to sleep only moments earlier, was easily awoken by the light. Startled, he sat up quickly, accidentally knocking over a shampoo bottle in the process. He was on the verge of blowing his gasket when Elise, hearing a noise from behind the shower curtain and fearing her childhood fears had been realised screamed loudly.

Suddenly more awake, Elise found herself shouting for Darcy, calling him to help defend her against the intruder in the bathtub. So, when Darcy stood and pulled back the shower curtain exasperatedly, she was very much taken aback to discover that in fact, Darcy himself was the intruder in the bathtub.

"Darcy?" she asked, as he stood facing her, a pitiful sight, his hair ruffled and eyes bloodshot.

"What's going on?" he asked with a resigned voice, lifting both his hands to rub his eyes with vigour.

"I could ask you the same," Elise replied, awake and back to her usual snarky self. "Why are you in the shower with the door unlocked the water off and fully dressed?"

"Why not?" Darcy responded sarcastically. Elise's continued perplexed expression persuaded him to elaborate further. "The leak above my bed led me to believe I might actually be dryer sleeping in the tub than in my bed."

"What? It's that bad?" Elise asked, feeling somewhat guilty for the several nights of decent sleep she had managed. Not bothering to wait for an answer when she once again took in his pathetic state, Elise felt she should at the very least try to provide Darcy an alternative to the cold, hard tub. "Darcy, come on," she said pulling his hand. "Grab your duvet and pillow, you can sleep in my bed."

"What?" Darcy responded, finally perking up.

"I said come sleep on my bed. I would bring your duvet and pillow because I tend to hog the blanket, or so I've been told anyway," Elise instructed.

Too sleep deprived and frustrated to refuse on the grounds of propriety, Darcy gathered his things and shuffled along behind Elise to her room.

Elise entered the room and unceremoniously plonked herself down onto the bed. She positioned herself on the far side of the bed, lying on her side with her hands below her pillow. She closed her eyes briefly, letting out a small sigh, before reopening them to look at Darcy expectantly.

Darcy eyed the vacant side of the bed hesitantly, but a moment of contemplation of going back to sleep in the bathtub was enough to convince him that sharing a bed with his charge was an encounter he was willing to endure.
Sandman came and Elise, her bladder now empty, was very quickly fast asleep once more. Darcy initially felt stiff and restricted in a situation that he found mildly awkward and was thus unable to get comfy enough to fall asleep. However, when he heard Elise's breathing slow as she succumbed to sleep, he was able to relax before he too joined her in contented slumber.

Darcy was far too warm. That much he could recognise in his sleeping state, although he remained unaware that the source of his warmth was a combination of the California weather, two thick duvets laid over him, and the body heat of his charge whose back was pressed against his chest.

Waking up due to the heat that was suffocating him, Darcy blinked a couple of times in succession, before he identified the body that was flush against his own. He lay very still as he determined the best course of action, which in his mind was to back away slowly from Elise, and return to his side of the bed. He was extremely taken aback however at the sound of her muffled voice.

"Your gun is poking me," Elise uttered.

Darcy tensed even further. He hadn't even realised that she was awake! Furthermore, as he looked down his body, he could see no identifiable cause for her comment. *This is going to be awkward,* he thought.

"Um…" he began, quickly trying to think of an appropriate response.

"But I didn't put the hamster in the washing machine, I just want you to pass me the polo mint," Elise mumbled.

Utterly discombobulated, Darcy lay still, listening for further speech from the body that lay still beside him.

"I bought us a megaphone for the car," she announced.

There was all the confirmation he needed to conclude that Elise was spouting nonsense in her sleep, and he breathed a small sigh of relief before shifting away from her and back to the cool linen on his side of the bed.

"So…" Darcy began entering the kitchen to find Elise laying out 2 perfectly poached eggs on a plate for him, "…you talk in your sleep."

"Hmm?" Elise responded as she extracted four pieces of toast from the toaster, placing two pieces on each of the plates already laid out with two poached eggs.

"You talk in your sleep. You were spouting some really random crap last night… or early this morning more accurately," Darcy elaborated.

"Oh yeah," Elise acknowledged, "I maybe should have mentioned that, I hope it didn't disturb you too much."

"No, not at all," Darcy replied smirking, "you had some pretty interesting banter, it's all good."

Elise looked mildly concerned, "Interesting how? What did I say?"

It was then Darcy's turn to look worried as he recalled her comment about the gun. "Oh nothing really," he replied shrugging it off, "to be honest you were talking complete nonsense. And you mumbled so I'm not even sure I could fully make out words."
"Oh, ok then," Elise said, her focus shifting back to her breakfast preparations. She placed a plate down in front of Darcy and the other one down in front of her seat. "Jenine always tells this story about how this one time, when we were kids and shared a room, I started talking to her in my sleep but she didn't realise. Apparently I asked her what type of toothpaste she liked best, and she properly thought about it for a while and then was like 'Colgate, how about you?' She was astounded when the next thing I said was 'McDonalds.'"

Darcy chuckled at the thought, knowing full well that Elise could sound entirely awake while talking in her sleep.

"So, whatcha got planned for today?" he asked, in a conversational tone.

"Hmm, I dunno, it's such a nice day today," Elise mumbled back before she swallowed the food in her mouth. "One of the downsides of not living at my dad's is that I can't just up and go for a swim whenever I want."

"Yeah, that is a shame," Darcy agreed. "You could still always move back…?" he suggested.

Elise chuckled, "Nice try, Darcy. I love how hopeful you sound. I'm too stubborn to give up and move back."

"Don't I know it," Darcy muttered.

Elise pushed him playfully. "It's so bright and sunny today! Don't you just want to be in the water?" Elise asked, but she didn't allow him time to reply. "I betcha I could outswim you!" she provoked.

"In my current state, you probably could," Darcy agreed.

"What do you mean your current state?" she enquired, befuddled.

"I'm so out of shape right now," he explained.

Elise snorted and rolled her eyes, "You don't look in the least bit out of shape to me," she replied, "stop acting like such a girl."

"I'm not acting like a girl! I've put on loads of weight and yeah a reasonable amount of it is muscle, but I'm nowhere near as lean as I was back in my swimming heyday. Also, there's the additional issue of my shoulder."

"Is that where you got injured? Your shoulder?" Elise asked.

"Yeah," Darcy replied sullenly.

"How did it happen?" she pushed.

"Uh… there was a car accident," Darcy said vaguely.

Deciding she had probed him enough for one day, Elise decided to let it go and began washing up, leaving Darcy to his own thoughts as he did the drying.

"Daaarcy!" Elise summoned, as she emerged from her room that afternoon.

"What can I do for you, my good lady?" Darcy asked in a haughty voice as he came to stand in front of her.
"Grab your trunks! We're going swimming!" Elise announced excitedly.

"We are? Wait… are you moving back home or is this something else?"

"Good joke," Elise replied. "We're going swimming at Casa Lucas with Carla and JW," she explained.

"You invited yourself over so you could use their pool?" Darcy accused.

"I did no such thing!" Elise defended. "I merely called Carla to see how she was, seeing as I have not seen or spoken to her in a while and I wanted to know all her gossip. There may have been some mention of how lovely the weather is, how pleasant it would be to go for a swim and what a shame it is that I don't live at my Dad's anymore where there is in fact a pool."

"So… basically you invited yourself over?" he persisted.

"I did not at all. Carla is the one who said 'Oh Elise! Why don't you come over here where we can swim and gossip and frolick in the sunlight?''"

"So… you manipulated her into inviting you over. Which is pretty much the same as inviting yourself."

"Shut up Darcy, stop wasting time and gather your water-wear so that we can be off!"

The atmosphere was off. Elise was sitting beside Carla by the edge of their pool with her feet dangling in the water, as both girls sipped at glasses of coke. But they were sitting in silence. Granted they were both sipping refreshments but nonetheless, Elise knew something was up. Carla had been nowhere near as loquacious as usual; even her usually exuberant greeting for Elise had been toned down.

The group had been in the pool for over an hour. They had all been swimming laps back and forth initially. However Elise and J.W.'s competitive friendship meant that it wasn't long before the two were challenging each other to races across the pool. They'd invited Carla and Darcy to join in, but Darcy had politely declined with some excuse, which Elise could tell was just a cover to make sure he didn't show them all up with his superior swimming skills. Carla had somewhat surprisingly declined as well, preferring to continue swimming laps back and forth at a leisurely pace.

The racing had quickly turned into splashing and joking around, and before long J.W. and Elise were tossing a beach ball at each other from either end of the pool. Carla had continued with her laps for a while, before returning in doors to grab everyone sodas to drink.

Darcy was the only one who had maintained swimming laps the entire time. He was somehow moving with speed but maintaining an entirely relaxed appearance as he did lengths of butterfly back and forth. From her current vantage point, Elise could appreciate the toned muscles of his back as he brought his arms over, and his turning and kicking off the wall afforded her a view of his highly defined dimples of Venus.

"So…how are things?" Elise asked Carla, attempting to start up a conversation with her. The fact that she was attempting to make small talk with her best friend by lamely asking mundane questions was not lost on Elise.

"Oh, you know, the usual," Carla responded. "How about you?"

Elise couldn't comprehend the awkwardness that seemed to have fallen between them. "I'm just so
glad to be in the water on a day as great as this," Elise responded with a somewhat falsely chirpy tone. In reality she was appalled that they had been reduced to discussing the weather. When Elise spotted J.W. returning from indoors with four popsicles in hand, she was relieved that there would be an additional party joining their conversation.

J.W. handed out the popsicles, Elise glad to have been able to get the raspberry one, and summoned Darcy from the pool handing him one as well. Soon the party of four was seated in a line, their feet dangling in the water as they enjoyed the heat of the day combined with the cool of the flavoured ice.

"Guys," Elise was taken aback as Carla interrupted their peaceful interlude, for the first time that day seeming to want to converse. "Since the two of you are my best friends," Carla began, "and Darcy you seem like a nice guy," she added, "I feel like I need to tell you guys my news first." Elise and J.W. eyed her warily, worried about what was to come.

I'm quitting my job…” Carla began her announcement, and was swiftly interrupted by exclamations of 'finally!' as well as the expected questions of what and why from both her brother and her best friend.

"I've got a new job…” she continued, and was once again interrupted by exclamations and questions from the other two.

"It's in Baltimore," she concluded.

"What?" both Elise and J.W. uttered in simultaneous shock.

"I've agreed to help with the production of Nicoll Collin's talk show, and together we're going to start setting up a production company that will hopefully not only be producing his show, but also my own show where I get to start producing some investigative journalism documentaries. I'm using some of the money I've saved from over the years- I mean I've always been pretty frugal- to help start out and everything. Unfortunately his show is largely based on the east coast, which is going to need me to move over there, since for the time being we're going to continue working under his current production company until we can get all the details arranged and finalised. So yeah, I'm moving to Baltimore to follow my dream," Carla explained, the explanation rushing out of her mouth as each thought passed through her mind.

"Carla… What? You're planning on working with Nicoll Collins? Why would you ever want to do that? He's such an… odious man," Elise grimaced at the thought of him.

Carla rolled her eyes with some irritation. It annoyed her that all Elise had taken from her announcement was that she would be working with Nicoll Collins, regardless of the fact that she was being given the opportunity to follow her career dreams at last and the fact that she'd be moving halfway across the country away from everyone and everything she knew. As much as she loved Elise, it did frustrate Carla how stubborn she could be about anything related to anyone who happened to make a bad impression on her.

"Elise, he's giving me the opportunity to do what I really want to do for a living. Yes, we've yet to work out all the finer details, but I finally feel like I'm actually making progress. Rather than sitting and doing a job I don't like and don't want to do without taking any action to change that, I'm going to be starting out doing a job I'm not that into, but at least I finally have a game plan to get where I want. So, quite frankly I don't care whether he's odious or melodious or anything else," Carla said defensively.

"You're planning to move?" J.W. asked, the thought of Baltimore finally hitting him.
"Yeah," Carla acknowledged, "it's not ideal, and I'd rather not, but I kind of have to for now anyway. We'll see what happens later on."

"You never said anything about this until now," Elise stated accusingly.

"Yeah, this is the first you've mentioned any of this, and it's kind of a huge decision," J.W. backed up Elise.

"Well I didn't want to say anything until I knew better what was happening. Now that I've told you guys, I'm obviously going to keep you both updated on the details of what's happening and what I'm planning. And both of you have been busy anyways, Elise you've been sorting out your new place, and Jun Wei you've been sneaking around hiding whatever it is you're hiding," Carla defended herself.

"I'm not hiding anything," J.W. said, a little too quickly and defensively for either girl to believe him.

"You're my brother Jun Wei, I mean we may not be blood, but I've known you for a pretty long time, so don't think you can pull the wool over my eyes. I may not know you're secret, but I can say without a doubt you're hiding something and I get the distinct feeling whatever it is, is about a girl. But hey, I'm not going to pressure you into telling, unless you've knocked someone up, you can go ahead and let me know in your own time," Carla said, hammering the point of taking time, showing that she had done no wrong by waiting to tell her news until she was ready.

"Is this about that person you mentioned you were interested in before? The one you're getting all buff for?" Elise asked, her attention now shifted from Carla to J.W.

"I'm not sneaking around and I did not knock anyone up," J.W. announced, ignoring the rest of the statement Elise and his sister had made.

Elise in turn ignored his feeble defense. "Wait but I thought you just liked that girl and you didn't know if she liked you? I didn't realise there was anything to be sneaking around about. Are you guys together now?" Elise pushed.

J.W. remained entirely mute, his expression nonchalant. He was not impressed that the attention was suddenly all on him.

"Wait, you're interested in someone?" Carla asked. "You didn't tell me this! And here you were giving me grief about taking too long to tell you something."

"Yeah I'm interested in someone, but it's not a big deal or anything yet," J.W. stated contritely.

"YET!" Elise exclaimed clapping gleefully.

"Who is she?" Carla demanded.

J.W. ignored her, shaking his head.

"Do we know her?" Carla questioned.

Once again, J.W. made no move to respond.

Carla and Elise made eye contact. "Ok, so we do know her," Carla stated.

"He said before she was a really good friend," Elise informed Carla.

"Oh, then we definitely know her," Carla confirmed. "He doesn't even have that many female
friends, like off the top of my head you're the only one I can think of."

"Hmm, this is going to take some detective work," Elise suggested.

"Yeah and a little Facebook stalking," Carla agreed.

"Stop talking about me as if I'm not here!" J.W. complained.

During the entire conversation, Darcy, who was present although forgotten had been turning his head to look at whoever was speaking, without making any comments himself. As if he didn't feel awkward and out of place enough already, the situation between the three friends was clearly a little tense.

Elise and Carla continued to try to squeeze information out of Jun Wei, but had little success other than determining that the woman was a close friend and that J.W. was not ready to admit anything further. He had never been more relieved however to here the ringing of Carla's iPhone in the hopes that a phone call would bring him reprieve.

Both Elise and J.W.'s ears perked up as they heard Carla greet Nicoll on the phone, however they were not able to head any further of the conversation as Carla disappeared indoors.

In Carla's absence, Elise tried a little further to find out more about J.W.'s mystery woman to no avail. They then went on to quietly discuss how unlike Carla it was to make a spur of the moment decision, and their various thoughts on how she would manage in Baltimore, and in Elise's case how she thought her friend would manage not to kill Collins.

When Carla's absence went on and it became apparent that she would not be rejoining them at the pool, Elise and Jun Wei decided to pack up and call it a day, determining that the three of them would have to meet again soon to further discuss the developments in Carla's life. Elise in her own mind added that next time she intended to find out more about J.W. secret as well.

Darcy rubbed the towel over his freshly shampooed wet curls one more time before draping it over the clotheshorse in the living room. He then entered Elise's room to find her equally fresh from a shower, sitting upright in bed and reading a novel under the light of her bedside lamp. He climbed into the bed and pulled the duvet over him, laying his semi-dry curls on the pillow. He sighed contentedly, enjoying the feeling of cool fresh sheets on his clean fresh self.

"Mind if I read for a couple more minutes?" Elise asked, "I can leave it though if the light is going to disturb you," she added, feeling bad for the bedless Darcy.

"No, no, go ahead," he acquiesced, looking up at her.

"Thanks," she responded, once more becoming engrossed in the novel.

Darcy rolled onto his side, such that his back was to Elise and the light of the lamp, and his face towards the door.

Out of the corner of her eye, Elise caught his movement, and her gaze soon fell onto Darcy's dark curls, contrasting with the stark white of his pillow. Almost unconsciously, Elise reached out with her right hand and ran her hands through his hair, gently rubbing his head as her fingers went through the locks of hair.

Darcy hummed contentedly, "What are you doing?" he asked, immediately regretting his question as Elise's hand stilled in his hair and the massage he was enjoying ceased.
"Sorry," Elise apologised with some embarrassment, "your luscious locks were just too inviting," she explained.

"No, don't apologise," Darcy said, "keep going."

Elise obliged his request. Darcy sighed and hummed as the fingers of Elise's right hand worked their way over his head and Elise's eyes returned to their focus on the words of the book she held in her left hand.

As Elise arrived at a particularly shocking paragraph in the tale she was following, her hand stopped its absent minded movement. Darcy huffed in frustration, and decided to take charge, reaching back to hold Elise's wrist, keeping her hand still and allowing him to rub his scalp against her fingertips once more. As such, he succeeded in drawing Elise's attention back to him from the novel.

Laughing at Darcy's behavior, "You're a cat," she accused.

"It just feels so good," Darcy said with emphasis, "please don't stop."

Elise laughed again and returned her hand to it's massaging and her mind to the words on the page before her.

"So… are you mad at Carla?" Darcy asked softly, distracting Elise from her reading once more.

"Mad? No, not at all. I guess I'm mostly just in a 'what the hell happened?' state. I'm not mad, I'm mildly offended, but it's mostly just that the whole situation is just really strange."

"Offended? I thought there was pretty much no way in hell you would ever collaborate in any way with Nicoll Collins?"

"Yeah, ugh of course not. It's not that I'm jealous, if that's what you're suggesting," Elise stated steadfastly.

"You're not jealous… but you are territorial over Collins?" Darcy probed.

"Ew, no. If anything I'm territorial over Carla. She's my best friend and I don't get what happened, yeah I've been self involved lately… or maybe even always… but when did Carla decide she was this desperate for the shot and getting on the career path she wants. And why on earth would she decide to work alongside Collins to get there?" Elise responded forcefully.

She soon lost track of the fact that she was still speaking to Darcy, and began to vent all her worries out loud, processing them as she went along. "I don't know it's really weird because today I just felt like there was a rift between Carla and I, and she's supposed to be my best friend! I don't get it. Did I do something to piss her off? And if I did why won't she just tell me outright rather than cavorting with my enemy and deciding to run halfway across the country with him?" Elise questioned with frustration.

Darcy pulled his head away from her hand, finding that as her irritation had risen her fingers had become more brutal and quite frankly he feared she would squish his brain to a pulp.

"Don't you think you're being a bit dramatic?" Darcy asked, immediately regretting it however when he saw the glower on her face.

"It's not dramatic! She's my best friend! I don't even understand what happened!" Elise replied, her fists clenched in childlike anger.
"Elise, I think you'll only make matters worse by getting annoyed with Carla or saying anything to her that could make things more tense. Just let her know that you're there to listen and put out some feelers to see if she gives you a clue as to why she might be upset with you. But honestly, you've probably not done anything, sometimes people drift apart you know, for no real reason."

"Yeah sometimes people drift apart, but this is Carla! She's my best friend! She has been for years!" Elise exclaimed.

"Well lately you seem to be pretty close to her brother," Darcy said, trying to keep the accusatory tone out of his voice. "Sometimes you get closer to one person and drift away from another."

"No, you're wrong. First of all Jun Wei and I are no closer than usual. And secondly my friendship with J.W. is one thing I can say for sure has nothing to do with all this Carla drama," Elise replied stubbornly.

"Maybe Carla is backing off you to give Jun Wei room," Darcy hypothesised, in his own mind convinced that it was Elise that Jun Wei was interested in.

"Give Jun Wei room for what? I've been friends with both of them for years," Elise said, finding all of Darcy's suggestions flawed, nonsensical and stupid.

"Yeah but it seems like now Jun Wei wants to be more than just friends with you," Darcy accused, finally working up the courage to voice the suspicions that were plaguing his mind a little too much for his own comfort.

"What the hell, Darcy?" Elise sat up more straight, suddenly quite outraged. "Are you suggesting that Jun Wei is interested in me?"

"Well it certainly seems that way," Darcy stated.

"It certainly does not. If he was interested in me why would he tell me about this other person he's interested in?"

"Because maybe that person is you! Or maybe that person is fictional and he just wants to stir you into action by adding the incentive of jealousy," he suggested.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"It makes perfect sense to me. This is how guys act sometimes when they're interested in someone and trying to scope out if the person might be interested back."

"It makes no sense to me. You males make no sense to me. Why would you play these stupid mind games for no good reason? How do you eat so much and not get fat? Don't you find it troublesome to walk with additional dangling body parts? Like, what is wrong with your half of the species? Although that said Carla is a girl and she is being just as ridiculous and confusing as a man right now," Elise ranted, her cheeks pink with her frustration.

Darcy looked up at her face and chuckled at the disgruntled expression he saw combined with her flushed appearance.

"Great, now you're laughing at my plight. What's so funny?" Elise asked dramatically, frowning at him.

"You are. I think you should sleep on all this drama. I'm sure by tomorrow things will be clearer," Darcy instructed, reaching over to extract the book from Elise's hand, which she let go of with no
resistance.

Elise yawned and rubbed her eyes, and Darcy found himself amused by her childlike mannerisms.

"Fine," she conceded, allowing him to reach over her to turn off the lamp as she sank down into bed. Darcy reached over and patted her shoulder sympathetically, before he too sank down to go to sleep.

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