



**MURDER
&
MATCHMAKING**

DEBBIE COWENS



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IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED, THAT A pug in possession of good appetite must be in want of a biscuit.

This truth was so well fixed in the mind of Lydia the pug that she considered the shortbread, which Mr Bennet held loosely in his right hand, her rightful property.

‘Mrs Bennet!’ Mr Bennet looked up from his book and addressed his wife with alarmed astonishment. ‘That pug of yours has stolen my biscuit again, and I feel it is only right to inform you that I have every suspicion that the animal has designs upon the tea tray. It has been eyeing the cakes in a singularly covetous fashion...’

‘Fie, such nonsense. Designs upon the tea tray? How can you accuse poor little Lydia of such things?’ Mrs Bennet set aside her needlework and bent to lift the pug onto her lap. She gazed at her dog’s wide-set brown eyes, glossy coat and dainty features. ‘I will not have you

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‘speak ill of my Lydia, Mr Bennet. You know that I look upon her as one of the family, and love her just as much as our own four daughters.’

‘Considerably more than most of us, I should imagine,’ muttered Elizabeth, the second eldest of the daughters in question.

This remark was heard only by her sister, Jane, who suppressed a laugh in between coughs.

Mrs Bennet continued: ‘I wager there is not a dog in all of Hertfordshire with a prettier face or sweeter disposition than Lydia.’

Lydia, in evident agreement with this statement, licked her mistress’ chin.

Mrs Bennet was a great connoisseur of feminine beauty and indeed it must be owned that she herself was a very handsome woman. As to the sweetness of her temper, there was less compelling evidence; yet in all her forty years she had given none of her family or general acquaintance reason to suppose her a murderess.

At the age of nineteen she had been so fortunate as to win the hand of Mr Bennet, a gentleman of an amiable nature whose fortune and respectability were greater than she might have hoped to claim. During the course of her marriage, Mrs Bennet had quite unintentionally acquired the burden of four daughters in the pursuit of providing a son and heir to her husband’s estate. While she remained adamant that she loved her daughters as much as could be expected of any mother, they were a constant source of anxiety for her as they were all unmarried and most vexatiously unattractive.

Indeed the greater share of maternal affections were

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lavished upon her beloved pug, for the dog possessed all the grace, beauty and vivacity that Mrs Bennet's daughters lacked. Lydia repaid Mrs Bennet's preference with exuberant canine devotion and loyalty. When Mrs Bennet found it necessary to embark on her career as a murderess, the pretty pug had faithfully accompanied her. Lydia had scampered at her mistress' side on the riverbank as she grappled with her first victim, Miss Charlotte Lucas, before forcing her into the water and drowning her.

By the time of the second attack, Lydia had developed so strong an understanding of Mrs Bennet's wishes that the small dog had charged Miss Fanny Price, the vicar's pretty ward, with such fierce yapping that the wretched girl had tripped and fallen in the churchyard. Mrs Bennet had then dashed the girl's head with a rock before she had a chance to rise. It had been easy to position the slain girl as though she had fallen against a tombstone. Unfortunately, Lydia had erupted into a fit of excited barking as she darted in circles around the body, and Mrs Bennet had been forced to speak in a most severe tone for fear of her raising the alarm.

With her youngest daughter now sixteen, the problem of four unmarried daughters troubled Mrs Bennet more each day. The failure of any of them to catch husbands could not in any fairness be laid at Mrs Bennet's feet. She had done all that could reasonably be expected of a dutiful mother to raise the marriage prospects of her offspring. Nature had not been generous with her daughters when endowing the gifts that could usually be relied upon to attract a husband. Even Mrs Bennet,

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who perceived her daughters with the generosity of a mother's hopeful eyes, could find little charm or beauty in them. Alas, the poor girls had taken after their father a good deal more than would be advisable for a young lady, especially as he possessed a complexion too inclined to freckle, small grey eyes, and such coarse, plain features as could only be considered tolerable on a gentleman whose appearance was improved by fortune and respectability. Mr Bennet, though never a handsome man, had at least been fortunate enough to have his features softened and improved by years of comfortable living. He could now be considered almost distinguished in appearance, a fate which Mrs Bennet could not anticipate befalling her daughters.

Kitty, her youngest, was an awkward creature of insipid looks and shy stammering. Mary, her next youngest daughter, had crooked teeth and a disposition too bookish and sanctimonious to attract any man. Elizabeth gave her the most trouble, with her wilful nature and impertinent opinions. Perhaps her remarks might have been considered witty if she possessed some charm or beauty, but in a girl with such a large, protuberant mouth and sharp eyes, it was most undesirable. Jane, the poor dear, was the eldest and whilst she was prettier than her sisters, she was a congenitally ungraceful girl with a mortifying inaptitude for all accomplishments. Her attempts at dancing were the most appalling sight Mrs Bennet had ever beheld and she compounded this most grievous disadvantage by inclining to towards ill health. Indeed Mrs Bennet could not remember a winter that had not been plagued by Jane's persistent

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cough. Jane had on frequent occasions become so ill as to be confined to her bed, and the apothecary was much sent for – the expense of which might have been better received had the girl not persisted in repeatedly recovering. Was it too much to ask that her daughter settle upon one thing – ill or well, alive or dead – and then resolve to see the matter through to its conclusion?

‘Jane, you must take pains to sit up straight,’ Mrs Bennet instructed her daughter. ‘Your shoulders are by far your best features, but you will never show them to advantage if you slouch so!’

Jane nodded meekly and endeavoured to correct her posture, but the rigid position made the poor girl look even more inelegant and spill her tea down the front of her gown.

‘Oh, Jane! You clumsy girl. I declare I do not know what is to become of us all,’ Mrs Bennet cried.

She stroked the pug on her lap and wished bitterly that her daughters’ hair had some of the silky sheen of Lydia’s coat.

‘Do not fret so, my dear, all will turn out well.’ Mr Bennet did his best to soothe his wife as he turned a page, if only to try to obtain a small measure of the peace he desired. He had often thought that family life might suit him a great deal better if only Mrs Bennet was not always at him to be doing something.

‘Indeed, I do not know how you can say such a thing, Mr Bennet. Your four daughters are none of them married, and if not for my best efforts there would be very little hope of any of them ever being so, for you do nothing about the matter,’ replied his wife.

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If Mrs Bennet regretted anything in life half so much as her daughters' unattractiveness, it was her husband's languid complacency. It was very well for him to avoid worrying about the future, for he would never go without the comforts that money could ensure, but what should happen to the family he would leave behind when he died? The estate, which had been vastly depleted through generations of imprudent profligacy and now comprised little but Longbourn, was to be entailed away to a nephew and the personal fortune Mr Bennet had accumulated would not be enough to adequately support Mrs Bennet, much less four dependent daughters. The only thought that vexed her more than the thought of her daughters being forced to live in miserable squalor was the notion that she might be turned out of her own house to join them.

Such terrifying prospects would surely drive any sensible mother to murder.

Though she had been surprised to find that murder was so thoroughly enjoyable, Mrs Bennet did not believe that this reflected any fault or wickedness in her character. She knew she only committed these acts to secure the future well-being of her daughters. Naturally, she would be able to stop killing once her daughters had husbands and there was no further use for such bloodthirsty deeds. Indeed, she felt adamant that she only enjoyed the planning and execution of such matters because her daughters had not been so good as to provide her with wedding preparations to occupy her active mind.

'Though I doubt it will do any good, I feel I must

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urge you to do your duty as a neighbour and a father, and call upon the gentlemen come to stay with Sir John at Barton Park as soon as may be.' Mrs Bennet pressed her husband after not more than a minute of peace had passed amongst the family. 'They are both unmarried, Mr Bennet, and quite rich indeed. Mr Darcy's family owns half of Derbyshire and his friend, the eminent physician Mr Bingley, has a fortune of nearly five thousand a year. I will have you know that Mr Lucas called on them yesterday and Mrs Lucas informed me that the gentlemen were very well disposed to meet him, and spoke most eloquently when expressing their condolences over the tragic loss of their daughter.'

Mrs Bennet still enjoyed a close intimacy with Mrs Lucas despite having drowned her pretty daughter, Charlotte, in the river last April, for Mrs Lucas had no knowledge of her involvement and Mrs Bennet saw no need to distance herself from their friendship. She had always enjoyed their ready exchange of neighbourhood gossip and took a great deal of duplicitous delight in consoling the bereaved mother. Indeed, playing the sympathetic shoulder to cry on had quite removed the ill will and jealousy Mrs Bennet had borne her friend. In the afterglow of her victory, she had quite forgiven Mrs Lucas for ever having possessed a beautiful daughter who had captured the attentions of many eligible officers encamped in Meryton last winter.

'I wonder that they knew of the tragedy at all,' remarked Jane between coughs. 'They can have scarcely been in the neighbourhood for more than a day.'

'I am not surprised that they did,' said Elizabeth.

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‘I have followed the career of Mr Sherlock Darcy with great interest. He and his friend have solved many mysteries and have brought some of London’s most notorious criminals to justice. The arrival of such a pre-eminent detective in this part of the country must surely be supposed by any reasonable mind to confirm what I have suspected all along: that the deaths of three young ladies of Hertfordshire are by no means coincidental and there is cause for further investigation. I should not be surprised if Sir John Middleton invited them here for no other purpose.’

‘No, indeed, I suppose no such thing,’ her mother insisted. She tickled Lydia behind her velvety brown ear. ‘Sir John often has distinguished gentlemen come for a shooting party near the end of the season. Detectives, as you call them, may be all very well in London, but I cannot believe so fine a gentleman as Sir John would arrange such tiresome business here.’

‘He is the magistrate, Mamma. I do not think it tiresome for him to do his duty and endeavour to see those responsible for such heinous crimes to be brought to justice,’ replied Elizabeth.

‘His duty to the neighbourhood would be better served if he had not cancelled the Barton Ball last month,’ said Mrs Bennet. ‘I should think everyone would benefit more from diversion and society than all this talk of death and gloom. I do not know why you insist on presuming your morbid preoccupations upon everyone, Lizzy. You have developed a most unattractive fascination with crime since Miss Charlotte’s accident. I have no doubt that these two gentlemen have come to enjoy the many

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pleasures that only the country can afford.'

'I cannot believe that one of England's foremost minds in criminology would care for such idle pleasures,' argued Elizabeth, for she was never one to be silenced or relent any of her opinions in the face of her mother's admonishments. 'The joys of country walks and shooting, I dare say, would hold little charm to a mind disposed to examine the darkest of human misdeeds and apply itself to the principles of careful observation and logical deduction.'

'Indeed, I have it on good authority that there is some truth in what Elizabeth surmises.' Mr Bennet spoke without looking up from his book, for he did not wish to see his wife's reproachful eyes as he once again took his daughter's part. 'Mr Darcy told me himself that he has much curiosity in the matter of these strange deaths. He asserts that the loss of one young lady in the area might be viewed as an unfortunate event; that two implies carelessness on the part of the inhabitants; but for three young ladies to have died in such short succession indicates something far more sinister.'

'Pray, how were you in a position to have heard the gentleman speak so?' inquired his wife.

'Did I not say? I meant to tell you that I had called at Barton Park this afternoon.'

'You have called on them?' Mrs Bennet was seldom given such cause to smile as to discover that her husband had complied with her wishes.

'Indeed we cannot escape the acquaintance now. The gentlemen expressed a desire to be introduced to you and the girls. They are to call tomorrow if there is no

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objection or inconvenience to you, my dear.'

'Objection! Inconvenience! How can you talk so? Two single gentlemen who wish to become acquainted with my daughters?' Mrs Bennet laughed in delight, unsettling Lydia, who had been about to commence a nap upon her mistress' lap. 'Why, I would crawl upon my hands and knees over hot coals for such an opportunity! Oh, but there is so much to do. I wish you had told me of this sooner, Mr Bennet, indeed I do. For now I must decide what each of the girls must wear and how to have their hair fixed so that they appear to best advantage when the gentlemen call.' She set the pug down and rushed about the room, ringing for the maid and clapping her hands in excitement. Lydia availed herself of an iced cake as recompense for the interruption.

The girls exchanged anxious looks. They knew their mother would now insist upon commandeering the rest of their evening in preparation for the visit tomorrow. There would be no idle hours for them to read their books, play the pianoforte or pursue any of their own pleasures.

'Hurry, girls, we have not a minute to lose.' Mrs Bennet ordered her four daughters upstairs. 'We must make haste and ensure you are all to bed early tonight, for a good night's rest is essential if your complexions are to be at their best. Heaven knows you girls need whatever beneficial effects sleep may afford your looks!'

2



THE SUN MADE A WELCOME APPEARANCE THE NEXT DAY and while the ivy-covered walls of Longbourn were more suited to gloom than bright sunshine, the hedgerows and well-tended garden appeared very fine indeed in the morning light. That Mrs Bennet's daughters also looked their best was no consequence of any meteorological occurrence, but of their mother's tireless instructions and insistence.

However, it was with a heavy heart that Mrs Bennet reflected that it was still unlikely any of her girls would excite the attentions of the visitors. Such distinguished and wealthy gentlemen must have the acquaintance of many elegant and accomplished ladies in London, and neither man had yet married, though they must have beheld a great many women whose beauty far exceeded that of all her daughters put together. All she could hope was that the Bennet girls' limited charms would be greatly served by there being no other ladies present.

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Indeed, had not her purpose in murdering three of the most beautiful young ladies in the neighbourhood been to ensure that her daughters might not suffer from such comparisons?

‘Lizzy, pray do not frown so,’ Mrs Bennet instructed. ‘No, no, you must not grin, Elizabeth, that is infinitely worse. I insist you refrain from any expression that might draw attention to your mouth. And Jane, that cough! Your incessant hacking shall put the gentlemen in mind of a clogged drain. Stop it at once.’

At the sound of horses approaching, Mrs Bennet jostled her daughters into the most flattering positions. ‘Here they are, come at last. Are they not handsome?’ Mrs Bennet sighed and thought the gentlemen looked very well indeed, but alas the sight of them provoked little reaction in her daughters, although Kitty squinted as she peered at them and bit her lip until Mrs Bennet admonished her with a look. She cast no such baleful gaze at Lydia, who barked and charged about the yard, and then took an aggressive interest a nearby shrubbery. Mr Bennet, who had been summoned from his study some ten minutes earlier, tugged at his cravat and stepped forward to greet their guests.

‘Mr Bingley, Mr Darcy, you are very welcome. May I introduce Mrs Bennet and our four daughters: Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, and my youngest, Catherine.’ He waved his hand at the line of Misses Bennet. ‘Too many to remember all their names, I dare say, but there you have it.’

‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ said Bingley, springing forward to shake Mr Bennet’s hand.

His companion took a cursory look over the yard, the house front and finally the Bennets themselves, before addressing his host: 'It would be no more to me to remember a mere four names than it would be to perceive that you are lately come from your library, where you had been occupied for the two hours previous; that you suffer from mild hyperopia; and that your left leg, which was injured some time ago, still gives you pain and discomfort in colder weather.'

'I must say that is an extraordinary declaration of facts, Mr Darcy,' acknowledged Mr Bennet. 'I should hardly dare to presume to know myself half as well as you. I suppose I should be flattered that Sir John has furnished you with so detailed a description of my character, although how you came to know of my reading in the library—'

'Sir John informed me of none of the particulars I related, sir. I declared nothing that was not immediately evident from my own observations.'

'You apprehended all that from a moment's glance?' exclaimed Mr Bennet.

'That you have come from your library is obvious from the faint impression in the thenar space, the webbing betwixt thumb and forefinger, and the corresponding mark on the interior knuckle of your forefinger, which are the unmistakable impressions left from hours of reading. That they were still apparent when you offered your hand indicated that your removal from the library was recent, and the creases in your dress confirmed that you had been seated some two hours.'

Mrs Bennet was mortified by this observation of the

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grievous injuries done to Mr Bennet's kerseymere coat, and considered it vindication of her belief in the evils of too much reading. She felt it most important to distract Mr Darcy before he noted the very ill manner in which Mr Bennet's cravat had slipped to one side. 'Perhaps we might now go inside and take refreshment?'

Mr Bennet ignored his wife and examined his hands before placing them together behind his back. 'Well, Mr Darcy, with such an extraordinary talent for insightful observations you must readily have the advantage of everyone you meet.'

'It is not extraordinary, I assure you,' replied Mr Darcy. 'It was as elementary as it is to deduce from the faint mark upon the bridge of your nose that you wear spectacles for reading, and that the hair at your temples has been flattened by the handles – so you wear eyeglasses, not a pince-nez or lorgnette. It is no difficulty of logic to infer that, as you have removed your eyeglasses to come outside, you therefore suffer from hyperopic vision and require them only for reading.'

Mr Bingley clapped his hands. 'Splendid. I can see you are impressed, Mr Bennet. It is a prodigious gift my friend possesses, is it not? I have had the pleasure of witnessing Mr Darcy's incomparable powers of observation for some seven years and I do not think I find it any less remarkable now than I did then.'

Mr Bennet raised an eyebrow. 'It is fortunate, then, that you do not find such perspicacious exhibitions tiresome. I have no doubt you are treated to them with some frequency.'

'Shall we go in? I am certain you gentlemen must

be most desirous to sit down after your ride,' said Mrs Bennet, regretting that her husband had not remained in his library along with his dishevelled attire that Mr Darcy appeared to find so enthralling.

Elizabeth's curiosity demanded one more matter be settled. 'I see perfectly how Mr Darcy observed these first two particulars about my father, but I do not follow how he ascertained that he sustained an injury some years ago. My father's habit of slightly favouring his right leg could be due to any number of circumstances.'

Mrs Bennet glared at her daughter. 'Elizabeth, do not bother Mr Darcy with your questions.'

Mr Darcy cast a disdainful glance over Elizabeth and her mother. 'To the uneducated eye I expect all injuries appear indistinguishable; however, it is not so. The stiffness in the lower leg, the alignment of the foot, the habitual lean to the left and unconscious curvature in the hand as though one had spent some time reliant upon a cane, are all indicative of a fracture concurrent with damaged ligaments. The most likely cause for such an injury for a country gentleman would be a riding accident where the horse fell and crushed the lower leg.'

'I think we would do better not to trouble Mr Darcy for any more of his observations,' declared Mr Bennet. 'I am sure he has delighted us all long enough.'

Mrs Bennet forced a smile. 'Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, please allow my Jane to show you into the sitting room.' She nudged her eldest daughter, who curtsied and stifled a cough.

'I have yet to encounter any residence where the arrangement of the rooms was not easily ascertained

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from numerous and easily observed facts,' Mr Darcy replied. 'The corner room with the northwest-facing windows would serve as a morning room – I could ascertain as much as we approached – and the drawing room will be at the back of the hall, no doubt with large windows and access to the gardens, as is usual in country houses of this style.' He crossed the yard in a few long strides and disappeared into Longbourn before anyone could inform him that this was indeed the case.

'Lovely place you have, most happily situated,' Mr Bingley said to Mrs Bennet. He held his arm out to Jane. 'Miss Bennet?'

Mr Bingley was such an amiable disposed gentleman that he was one of the few visitors to Longbourn who was not obliged to suppress a reaction of surprise upon entering the house. The exterior of the once great hall had been designed in accordance with the gothic sensibilities of Mr Bennet's wealthy and illustrious ancestor, and it comprised as many looming buttresses and tall windows as the great Sir Clarence Bennet thought a country residence could possess; which is to say a great many more than the architect wished. However, whatever opinion a visitor held regarding the aesthetics of the exterior of Longbourn, it seldom prepared him for what lay inside. Indeed, had Sir Clarence been a more prescient gentleman, he might have set out a provision in his will that his successors preserve the dark and ominous interior decoration and under all circumstances desist from marrying any lady possessed of the notion that Longbourn was in want of a 'woman's touch'. But as Sir Clarence Bennet had not done so, the portrait of

his imposing face was doomed to loom over the staircase of a great hall smothered in pink wallpaper, fligreed wainscoting and floral curtains.

Mrs Bennet did not hold high hopes as the conversation continued in the sitting room. The gentlemen were rich, respectable and handsome, which is to say in possession of every desirable quality in a potential husband. Mr Bingley remarked upon the comfort of the sitting room, the warmth of the family home, and the great pleasure he took in the country on a summer's day. Mr Darcy, on the other hand, showed no interest in the Bennets at all and flatly refused to express any opinion on the weather. He wanted only to talk about the deaths of local girls, as if bludgeonings and drownings were proper topics for discourse in the presence of eligible, if plain, young ladies. Mrs Bennet could not help but resent that a handful of pretty girls, even as corpses, attracted more attention from the gentleman than any of her daughters could merit.

'I understand from Sir John that your daughters were the first to discover the scene of Miss Charlotte Lucas' drowning?' Mr Darcy asked Mr Bennet.

'Indeed, that is correct,' Elizabeth answered, sparing her father the trouble of formulating a response. 'I was walking with Mary and Kitty when we came upon the lake. I expect you are already acquainted with my testimony from the inquest, but I should be happy to elaborate further as the questioning was by no means meticulous.'

'The eldest Miss Bennet was not with you that day?'

'No, indeed, sir.' Mrs Bennet was eager to claim a part

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of the conversation. 'Jane is of a delicate constitution and had a cold that prevented her from walking with her sisters from Meryton that day. It was most disappointing but she suffered it with the greatest forbearance, for she has the sweetest disposition in the world.'

'I trust that Miss Bennet has fully recovered?' Mr Bingley looked most concerned.

'It is a seasonal affliction which regrettably comes and, upon occasion, goes,' Jane informed him, blushing slightly under the gaze of the fair-headed doctor. 'Yet my cough is a steadfast companion, even in the warmer months, as I am sure my poor family could tell you.' Unintentionally, she coughed.

'It is always a burden to have sickness in one's home, a burden most deeply felt by those who carry the illness.' He smiled. 'I am resolved to return here tomorrow with a remedy I have developed that may soothe your cough, if you will permit this humble physician the honour of being of some little service.'

Jane, unaccustomed to such attention and concern, nodded and felt her cheeks burn.

'There, Jane, that's a fine promise for you.' Mrs Bennet could scarcely contain her excitement. 'Your kindness does you much credit, sir, and I wager you could not find a more grateful or deserving recipient for your attentions than dear Jane...'

'I understand that you endeavoured to pull Miss Lucas out of the water?' Mr Darcy spoke before Mrs Bennet might express further effusive gratitude on her daughter's behalf. It was plain that only a minute regard for etiquette and great respect for his friend had delayed

his question even this long.

‘Indeed, I did, sir. Mary and Kitty went immediately to fetch help, but I could not stand idle and wait.’

‘I do not know why you took it upon yourself to wade into the lake like that. Your petticoat was ruined, and your gown – ten inches deep in pond filth – and it was such a pretty print, too.’ Mrs Bennet shook her head.

‘Because, Mamma, if she had been alive, I might have been able to save her; but alas, it was too late. She had been dead some time, I think.’

Mrs Bennet looked pointedly at her daughter. She had instructed her on many occasions not to use such a frank and unemotional tone. Equanimity, whilst admirable in a gentleman, was not always desirable in young ladies. Indeed it was foolish to throw away the opportunity to display tender feminine sensibilities. ‘You must understand my daughter has been obliged to recount the unfortunate day a great many times.’

‘Not often enough, I would say, when the culprit has not yet been apprehended!’

‘She felt the loss of her dear friend most acutely.’ Mrs Bennet continued as though Elizabeth had not spoken. ‘You must not suppose by her matter-of-fact tone that the subject does not grieve her still. I would give anything that my young daughters’ delicate hearts could be spared the torment of raking over their memories of that day.’

‘In this, we are in agreement,’ said Mr Darcy, although his aloof expression conveyed no sympathy. ‘I would rather no young lady was ever called upon to bear

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witness to a crime, much less discover a body.’

‘It was indeed a most distressing experience.’ Mary spoke up from her seat by Catherine, clasping her copy of Fordyce’s Sermons on her lap. It had been her constant companion these last months. ‘We have all of us been forced to reflect upon the fragility of our own mortality and prepare for the Lord’s judgement.’

Mrs Bennet silenced Mary with a glare, before smiling at Mr Darcy. ‘That is very gallant of you, Mr Darcy, to be sure.’ Mrs Bennet scooped up Lydia, who had wandered back to her mistress on the completion of her perusal of Mr Bingley’s boots. The pug was content that this guest had paid due homage in the form of petting and ear-scratching; she was less certain of the other visitor, who had ignored her.

‘Gallantry! I assure you I am guilty of no such affectation. Naturally, it would be preferable for your daughters to have been spared such distress, but I was speaking of my own wishes. Ladies are such unreliable witnesses; young ladies especially so. One never knows what facts they will fix upon and what they will disregard, and as many times as not, they will give you answers they believe you wish to hear rather than what they truly think. I should rather have one man, even if he is hard of hearing or poor of sight, than half a dozen ladies to bear witness to a crime.’

‘That does not seem a logical preference at all.’ Elizabeth felt the slight of being presumed unreliable most acutely. ‘One man might for any number of reasons not have seen all there was to behold. With six ladies there should be a far greater chance of every

pertinent detail having been observed by at least one pair of eyes, and with corroboration between them as to the facts, you might be more assured of the accuracy of their accounts.'

'Indeed, that is not the case.' Mr Darcy regarded her with a superior expression. He was a gentleman in possession of the height and inclination to look down on nearly everyone, even when seated. 'Any corroboration between ladies would only suggest that they had been given the opportunity to discuss matters. When provided with the chance to talk together they might very well persuade each other that the black horse they saw was actually a grey, that a short gentleman was very tall indeed, and even that it was a sunny day when in truth it had been raining. No, if anything, the account of six ladies is to be trusted even less than that of one.'

'Upon my word, Mr Darcy, you have me quite convinced.' Mrs Bennet chuckled and gave Lydia an affectionate tickle. 'I certainly have the most terrible memory for horses. Ask me about the lace on a dress or a bonnet and you may depend upon it, I shall give you a most accurate account, but I could not rightly do justice to the fine pair of horses you and Mr Bingley rode here this very day!'

'We are fortunate indeed, then, that neither my mother nor any horses were present on the day we found poor Charlotte drowned,' Elizabeth muttered.

Mr Bennet suppressed a chuckle at his daughter's remark. 'I assure you, Mr Darcy, my Lizzy's account is as faithful as any you could wish for. You might very well consider Kitty and Mary as silly and unreliable as any

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other young girl, I dare say, but do not discount Lizzy. She has a bit more wit than rest.'

'Oh, Mr Bennet, how can you speak so unfairly of your daughters?' said Mrs Bennet. 'I am sure we would do much better to forget about that unfortunate event entirely. None of the girls' opinions are wanted. Mr Darcy has said as much.'

'I have been oft made aware these last months how little my opinions are wanted,' said Elizabeth. 'When I first spoke of my belief that Charlotte's death had not been accidental, Sir John regarded it as no more than the fanciful notion of a distressed young lady. If Sir John had not immediately dismissed my opinion, if he had understood that it was deduced from sound observation of the facts, some of the later crimes might have been prevented.'

'The gentlemen do not wish to hear your morbid theories. You would have us see murder in every drowning and accidental fall! I blame all those novels...'

Mr Darcy ignored Mrs Bennet and stared at Elizabeth. 'Sound observation, do you call it? There are not half a dozen individuals I consider capable of true observation.'

'You must apprehend a great deal in the notion.'

'Indeed. Observation requires a full and detailed inspection of the material facts, from the microscopic fragments to the physiographic features of the environs, and all this must be perceived without the corrupting influence of bias or emotion. In addition one must add to this a complete knowledge of all scientific disciplines and criminological principles, acuity of all the senses,

and a mind greatly improved by extensive reading.’

‘I am no longer surprised that you know only six individuals capable of such a task. I rather wonder at you knowing any.’

Mr Darcy regarded Elizabeth with a curious expression. Mrs Bennet could not decide whether Lizzy interested him or displeased him. Either way, surely *something* could be made of the otherwise aloof and supercilious Mr Darcy display any reaction at all. He was a handsome gentleman, although his hair was too dark and his features too grave for her tastes, and he was by all accounts very wealthy indeed. Mrs Bennet greatly preferred the fair looks, amiable manners, and kind, trusting nature of Mr Bingley, and it was clear he had taken a liking to Jane from the way his gaze kept returning to her. But what a fine conquest it would be if she could not only outsmart and elude England’s greatest detective, but also claim him as a husband for Elizabeth!

‘Mr Bingley, Mr Darcy, the day is so fine and the season so fair – would you care for a turn about the gardens? I am sure Jane and Elizabeth would be more than happy to show you all the delights they hold.’ Mrs Bennet stood and opened the doors. Lydia immediately darted out, providing an enthusiastic demonstration of the great felicity afforded in running about in circles on the grass and chasing after invisible prey amongst the flowers.

‘There is nothing I like better than a walk in a fine country garden and I dare say the fresh air might prove most beneficial for Miss Bennet – if she would accompany me?’ Mr Bingley stood and offered his arm to Jane.

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‘I should be delighted, sir,’ Jane replied.

Mr Darcy stood up and Elizabeth also rose to her feet.

‘Time does not permit for garden walks. Mr Bingley and I have much work to do and must take your leave.’ Mr Darcy nodded curtly at his host and hostess.

‘Surely, Mr Darcy, you gentlemen can spare a short half hour to enjoy the pleasure of sunshine and good company,’ Mrs Bennet said. ‘Your friend wishes it, and Elizabeth is a most eager companion, as you see.’

Elizabeth grimaced and wished, not for the first time, that she had had the good fortune to have been borne of a less embarrassing mother. ‘Indeed, no. That is, I am sure Mr Darcy has more urgent matters requiring his attention. In any case, I have a sudden headache. Pray excuse me.’ She left the room and hurried upstairs.

Mrs Bennet stared after her daughter’s hasty departure and noted that Mr Darcy also watched her leave, before he coughed and caught Mr Bingley’s eye.

Mr Bingley smiled apologetically at Jane. ‘I am sure you will excuse me, Miss Bennet. I am all keenness and should much rather take a turn about your garden – but duty does not permit on this day. My friend is right and we have a great deal of work to do. I shall call again tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow.’ Jane nodded. ‘Perhaps we might take our walk then?’

‘Indeed. Capital suggestion!’ Mr Bingley clapped his hands and bowed at his hosts. ‘Farewell.’

No sooner had the gentlemen taken their leave from Longbourn than Mrs Bennet proceeded to scold her

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husband. 'Honestly, Mr Bennet. I am sure you did not say above five words to our guests.'

'One hardly needs to speak to Mr Darcy at all for him to infer every aspect of one's character and habits. Who knows what family secrets he might have uncovered if I had been more loquacious?'

'You may very well take delight in your jokes, Mr Bennet, but why could you not have urged the gentlemen to stay longer? I am sure you could have made them stay.'

'How so, my dear? Mr Darcy seemed most eager to return to his work, and I had no reason to prevent him. Their visit seemed quite long enough to me.'

'You may not feel the loss of their company, but what of your daughters? Jane did most particularly want to spend more time with the handsome Mr Bingley. Did you not see how he favoured her? And I am convinced that poor Lizzy was devastated when Mr Darcy flatly refused to accompany her for a walk.'

Mr Bennet chuckled and stood up from his chair. 'Did you not hear her talk of a headache? I doubt that Lizzy any more wished to walk about the garden than did Mr Darcy.'

'Headache? Oh, Mr Bennet. You cannot believe such a thing. Was it not perfectly clear that Elizabeth was hurt by Mr Darcy's refusal and made that excuse so that she might leave to conceal her feelings? She is probably upstairs in her room, crying her heart out as we speak.'

'You are an attentive mother, my dear, to so readily see misfortune in such matters, but I can no more imagine Lizzy crying over the loss of Mr Darcy's company

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than that pug of yours refusing her dinner.'

'Perhaps I will go to see her.' Jane left the room to seek out her sister.

'A mother's instincts know these things, Mr Bennet. I do believe that Elizabeth admires Mr Darcy enough to fall very much in love with him, or at least, she will do, if she knows what is good for her.'

Mr Bennet caught the eyes of his two youngest daughters. They both wore the same uncertain expression as he did, but they all knew better than to stand between Mrs Bennet and a matchmaking prospect, even when there was no match to be made. Mr Bennet sought sanctuary in his library, Mary in the improving sermons of Fordyce, and Catherine in some very clumsy and unmusical practice on the pianoforte.

Mrs Bennet smiled as Lydia returned from her garden romp, panting from her exertions. Despite its unfortunate beginning, the gentlemen's visit had not been without promise. Mr Bingley had been very kind and attentive to Jane and Mrs Bennet was certain that with her assistance Jane might well win his heart. Mr Darcy was so severe and his manners so unpleasant that she could not determine what feelings he possessed, but he had clearly noticed Elizabeth and something could be made from that. She would urge Elizabeth to show more regard than she felt for the gentleman. Even if he could not be induced to return her affections, it would distract him from his meddling investigations. Yes, Mrs Bennet considered, her plans were coming along very well indeed.

3



ELIZABETH, CONTRARY TO HER MOTHER'S ASSERTIONS, was not in her bedroom, crying or otherwise. Upon quitting the room she had hurried to obtain the sketches she had made of the scene of Charlotte's murder. Convincing Mr Darcy of the validity and thoroughness of her account had proved impossible in the presence of her interfering mother, but if she were to show him her drawings he was sure to recognise their value as evidence.

Descending the staircase, she beheld through a narrow window the gentlemen standing outside. The window being ajar, she could not avoid overhearing their conversation as they waited for their horses to be fetched from the stables.

'You must understand, Bingley, the purpose of our visit was not to hear any repetition of their testimony about Miss Lucas' death, but rather to gain a picture of the neighbourhood and ascertain which young ladies

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might be targets. I have every suspicion that our murderer shall strike again.'

'Heaven forefend! Do you believe Miss Bennet and her sisters are in danger?'

'No, I do not believe so. All the victims have been renowned local beauties. The eldest Miss Bennet might be considered pretty enough, I grant you, but, as we have heard, her ill constitution keeps her at home.'

'All the same, I feel I must do my utmost to protect her and keep her safe.'

'I am sure you do, Bingley, but there is no cause to fear for her sisters. They lack the beauty and charms that have most particularly connected the three victims.' Elizabeth could hear the snide tone in Mr Darcy's voice and although she could only see his back, she could picture his dark, haughty eyes sneering at her.

'What of Miss Elizabeth Bennet? She has some most decided opinions on the case, does she not? Should we not fear that the villain will attack her to prevent her from revealing too much?'

'If the murderer wished to silence her, they would have done so before now,' replied Mr Darcy as he prepared to mount his horse. 'Her knowledge places her in no more danger than her appearance.'

'I say, Darcy, that's a little ungallant, even for you. There is nothing displeasing in her appearance.'

'She is tolerable, I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt our killer.' Mr Darcy swung on to the saddle and Elizabeth jumped back out of view. 'Bingley, I am in no humour to make flattering remarks about young ladies who are of no consequence to our case. We

have a murderer to discover.'

Elizabeth leant forward once more to watch the gentlemen ride away. She was still there, listening to the hoof beats fading in the distance, when Jane came upon her standing at the window.

'Lizzy? How are you feeling? You are not too upset, I hope.'

'Upset? No. I am more determined than ever, dear Jane,' said Elizabeth. 'My resolve increases with every attempt to deride me.' Pressing her drawings to her side, she looped one arm under her sister's and led her up the stairs.

'I have not ever known you to lack resolve, Lizzy, but what have you fixed your mind upon this time?' Jane asked.

'In one encounter, Mr Sherlock Darcy has provoked in me a fierce determination to prove him wrong,' Elizabeth hurried her sister into the room, shutting the door behind them and ushering Jane to sit down on the bed beside her.

'Is it because he asserted that a lady's account could not be relied upon?'

'Partly, but I must own as much dislike of his insults towards me in particular as those he has levelled against all ladies.'

'Mamma insisted that you were upset that he said he would not walk with you. I had not imagined that this slight would have affected you so greatly.'

'No, indeed. That is the one kindness he showed me,' said Elizabeth. 'To be spared his company for a walk in the garden. Imagine the offence he would cause in a full

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half hour of conversation.’

Jane laughed, which unfortunately induced a succession of coughs. When recovered she asked of her sister: ‘But Lizzy, you must tell me. What did Mr Darcy do that offended you do?’

Elizabeth gave her sister an account of the conversation she had overheard, taking pains to impersonate Mr Darcy’s sharp, condescending voice – and to make certain she did not unfairly taint Mr Bingley for his part in the conversation, for her sister’s partiality for that gentleman was abundantly clear.

‘Oh, Lizzy. It was very wrong of him to speak so. So unkind.’ Jane shook her head. ‘And he never even intended to question you about Charlotte? I confess I am surprised at that.’

‘As was your Mr Bingley.’

‘He is not *my* Mr Bingley.’

‘I think he may well be soon. When two such kind-hearted people take so strong a liking to one another, there cannot be many obstacles to their mutual affection.’ Elizabeth smiled, but it soon faded. ‘Unfortunately, I do believe that Mr Darcy was right in one regard.’

‘Lizzy, you cannot mean that you agree with what he said about you.’

‘No – I refuse to give any consideration to his remarks, so it is impossible to state whether I agree or disagree.’ Elizabeth’s tone was light but there was an iron-clad resolve beneath it. ‘What I mean is that he has found the connection between the victims that I had not. I knew them, Charlotte and the others, to be very different people indeed. Their connections, their

characters, their tastes, their pursuits, their situations in life – they were so varied as to puzzle me greatly. But to Mr Darcy, and indeed to the murderer, they were nothing more than three beautiful young ladies.’

‘You cannot mean they were murdered simply for being beautiful?’

Elizabeth nodded. ‘It is the only explanation.’ She went to her table and unlocked the drawer with a key she wore on a silver chain around her neck. She took out a large number of papers and a diary, and placed them on bed next to Jane. ‘You see, Jane, I have considered every other alternative. I have examined and categorised every aspect I could determine about their acquaintance and habits, and occasions where they were all present.’

‘I am sure not even Mr Darcy himself could find fault in your investigations,’ Jane remarked as she regarded the mountain of papers. She held up a diagram which mapped out every dance partner of the three victims in every ball and assembly over the last year. ‘You must have considered every possibility.’

Elizabeth frowned. ‘Little good came of it. I was certain I would find some clue, some singular connection between them – a dark secret known to all of them, or a thwarted lover whose advances they had all of them rejected. But I have uncovered nothing of that nature.’

‘But is it really to be believed that anyone would be so wicked as to murder not one but three innocent ladies without reason other than malice? If beauty was indeed their connection, what purpose would it serve to end their lives so viciously?’

‘Indeed. Sir John assured me there was no evidence

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of any unwholesome intent.’

‘Lizzie! Surely you did not ask Sir John such a thing?’

‘I most certainly did. I should mortify a dozen Sir Johns if it might aid my investigation, but it did not. They were none of them robbed, nor did anyone materially profit from their demise. I must therefore conclude that the murderer struck only out of the most malicious and superficial of motives – an impulsive, violent mania borne of a resentful obsession with beauty.’

‘Surely even the most jealous nature could not possibly descend to such vicious brutality?’

‘I would much rather it were impossible for such an individual to exist, but I fear it is not so. I have read in one of Bingley’s excellent accounts of the superior detective that if you have eliminated all other possibilities, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’ Elizabeth took her sister’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Jane, do you not see? I believe these killings were of a serial fashion. Whether the murderer acts upon design or spontaneous impulse of the moment, I know not, but I do believe that they act, at least in part, because they take pleasure in the act of killing itself.’

‘Could such an evil exist?’ Jane whispered. ‘And how is it ever to be brought to an end?’

‘The killer will not stop until they are found, but you may depend on this: I shall not stop either. Not until they are caught, not until there is justice at last for Charlotte, Fanny, and Emma.’

Jane embraced her sister and when she leaned back Elizabeth saw a tear forming in her eye. ‘I believe you shall find justice for all our poor dear friends, Lizzy. I

only wish I could be of more assistance to you.'

'You have already helped me immensely, Jane,' said Elizabeth. 'I would be lost indeed if I did not have you to confide in and to hear my thoughts. This investigation is such a tangle of theories and information that I am quite dependent on my dear Jane to help me know my own mind.'

'You are very kind, but I wish I could be of more practical aid. Perhaps if Mr Bingley's elixir helps, I might be able to accompany you on one of your sketching expeditions, or to call upon witnesses?'

Elizabeth recalled Mr Darcy's words. Was Jane's confinement at Longbourn the only thing that kept her safe? 'It would be unpardonable of me to allow you anywhere near me when I am to sketch, for you know I am tiresome in the extreme and tolerate no conversation or distraction when I am drawing,' she said with satirical severity. 'I would rather have you safe and at home so you might recover your health fully. I could not bear to lose you, Jane.'

'Well, I shall do my best, if only to please you, dear sister.' Jane smiled.

'There is one more way in which you could assist me further. If you would tell Mamma that my headache has not yet recovered and I am unable to come down for luncheon.'

'Why, Lizzy? I have never known you to miss a meal. You are not very unwell, I hope.'

'No; it is more a theory than a headache that plagues my mind. I must attend to it or I shall know no peace.'

'A theory?'

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‘It is only that ... if the murderer possessed no motive against their victims and acted out of spontaneous impulse, it casts a different light on how they might have encountered them. We know it was Fanny’s habit to visit the graves of her parents every Sunday morning, but what if the murderer happened upon her there by chance rather than by design?’

‘Then they must have been in the cemetery for some other reason entirely.’

‘Indeed. Perhaps to visit the grave of some departed friend or relative.’

‘I confess I do not see how that helps your investigation. Everyone in the area must know someone interred there.’

‘Yes, but most people do not visit the cemetery as part of their weekly routine, as Fanny did. It is far more common for people to visit on dates significant to the deceased, such as their birth date, or the day on which they died.’

Jane nodded. ‘You intend to survey the dates on the tombstones and see which match the date of Fanny’s death?’

‘Precisely. You anticipate me well, Jane. It is most unlikely that anything of use shall come of it but in want of any other apparent lead, I must at least try to find something to connect the killer to one of their crimes.’

‘Of course you must try. I shall tell Mamma that you have no appetite and desire only the time to clear your head. That much is no falsehood.’ Jane rose and went to the door before turning back to her sister. ‘Only, Lizzy, promise me you will be careful.’

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‘I shall, and I will conceal a candlestick in my reticule. If any dare assail me, they shall only have themselves to blame for the very sore head they shall incur.’ Elizabeth assured her sister. Jane shook her head and departed, leaving her sister alone to prepare for her excursion.