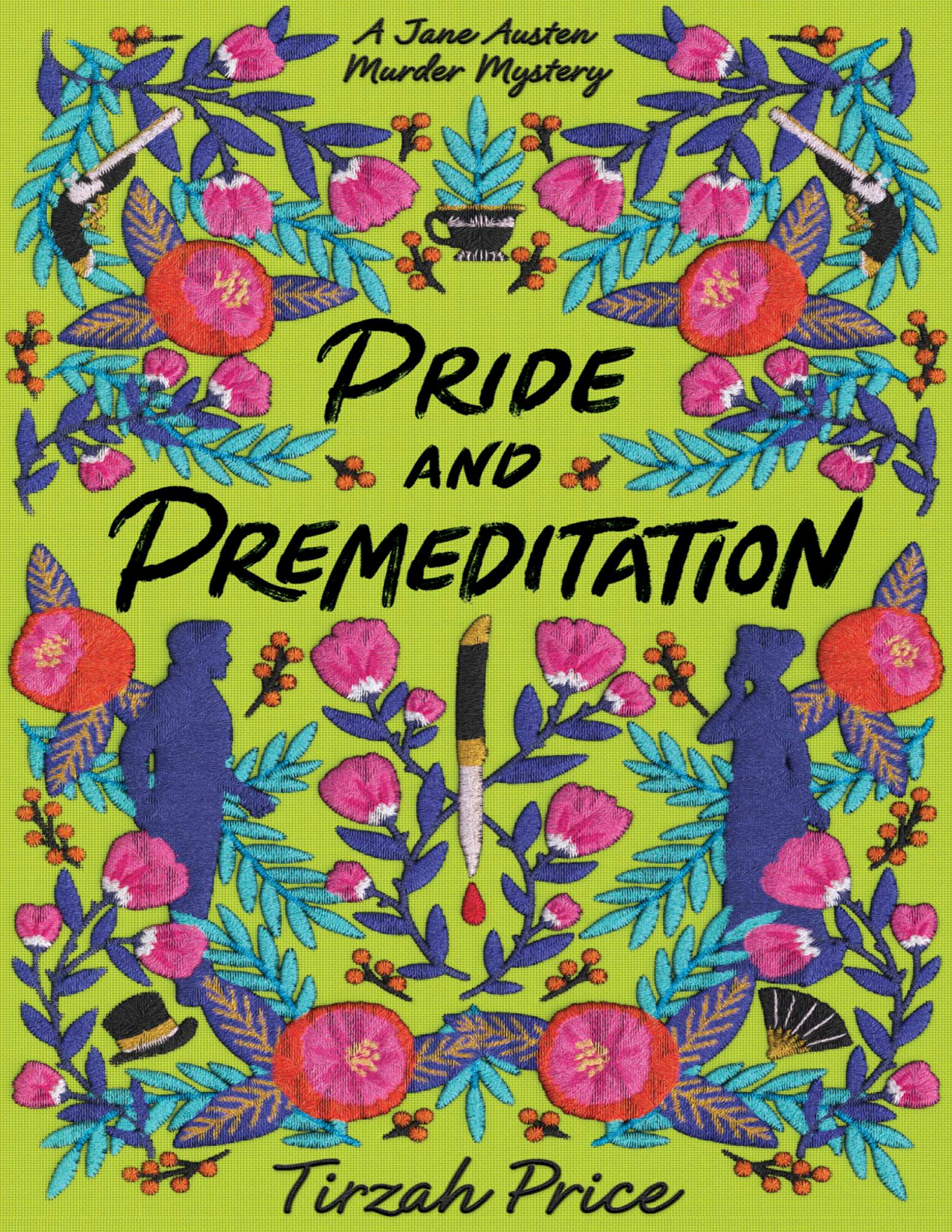


*A Jane Austen
Murder Mystery*

**PRIDE
AND
PREMEDITATION**

Tirzah Price



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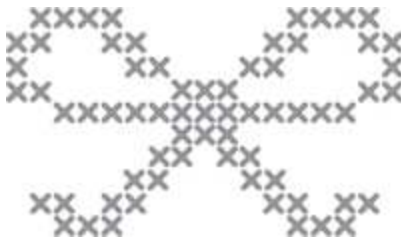
A JANE AUSTEN MURDER MYSTERY

TIRZAH PRICE

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Dedication

To all the obstinate, headstrong girls forging new paths.



Epigraph

“There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me.”

—*Pride and Prejudice*
by Jane Austen

“Instinct is a marvelous thing. . . . It can neither be explained nor ignored.”

—*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*
by Agatha Christie

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One

In Which Our Heroine Is Wronged, and Acquires a New Lead



IT IS A TRUTH universally acknowledged that a brilliant idea, conceived and executed by a clever young woman, must be claimed by a man.

Elizabeth Bennet stood in the offices of the optimistically named law firm of Longbourn & Sons and fixed her father's junior partner, Mr. Collins, with her fiercest glare. However, Mr. Collins just ignored her as he regaled the firm's employees with the details of *her* escapades as though they were his own.

"I knew from the very moment Mrs. Davis pleaded her case with us that something was not quite right about her story. Her husband accused of embezzlement, and she, a clerk's wife, dressed like a baroness?" He let out a loud, abrasive laugh that made Lizzie's head ache.

Mr. Collins was too preoccupied with his own importance to pay attention to something as "trivial" as the state of a woman's clothes! If Lizzie were to demand he close his eyes and name the color of her own spencer, she doubted that he'd be able to. (A fine emerald brocade, let the record show. Her older sister, Jane, had once said the jacket's color made Lizzie's eyes look bright.)

Lizzie's father, Mr. Bennet, listened to Mr. Collins's account with the patience of a man who had a lot of experience in enduring long-windedness. "And what happened next?"

“I made the appropriate inquiries, but still had my suspicions. I called upon Mrs. Davis three days later to question her some more. At one point, she became so flustered that she excused herself, allowing me time to, ah, glance upon the writing desk. I hoped that I might find some stray sum sheet, or letter . . .”

Mr. Collins fumbled, and Lizzie raised her eyebrows. “Is that so?” she asked.

No one paid Lizzie any attention, and Mr. Collins continued. “In fact, I found a rather intimate note, signed ‘J.A.’ I found that highly suspicious, so I questioned the neighbors and learned that Mrs. Davis stepped out at the same time every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. She often didn’t return for hours. I followed her the next day, and that’s when I discovered the identity of J.A.—John Alston, her husband’s boss!”

Lizzie’s dear friend Charlotte Lucas gasped audibly from her desk. As Longbourn’s secretary, she was privy to many scandalous details of the firm’s various cases, but they were rarely as salacious as this. It’d been precisely Lizzie’s reaction when *she’d* discovered that Mrs. Davis had been having an affair with the very man who’d accused her husband, James, of embezzlement.

“It was all a deviously clever setup! And now I turn the case over to you, sir, as barrister, to prove our client’s innocence and demand justice.” With great ceremony, Mr. Collins handed over the letters Lizzie had pilfered from Mrs. Davis’s writing desk and gave a slight bow to his audience.

Longbourn & Sons was not a very large firm—it consisted of her father, boorish and barely twenty-year-old Collins, three other solicitors, two clerks, and Charlotte, the secretary. Nonetheless, Lizzie seethed as she watched Collins publicly claim credit for evidence that she herself had discovered.

“I am going to wring. His. Neck,” she muttered, just loudly enough for Charlotte to cast a concerned glance in her direction.

“The important thing is that an innocent man will soon be free,” Charlotte said.

“I suppose.”

“Lizzie, you know that in all likelihood . . .”

Charlotte trailed off, knowing that she was dredging up something Lizzie knew all too well: She could not argue Mr. Davis’s case herself, no matter how much she longed to be called to the bar. It was no matter—even

if the courts would allow for a woman barrister, first she would have to convince her father that such a calling was appropriate for his beloved seventeen-year-old daughter.

“I know,” Lizzie said. “But that doesn’t mean he had any right to steal my work!”

Collins accepted handshakes and claps on the shoulder from the other solicitors and clerks while Mr. Bennet studied the letters. Gradually, the room quieted again as they waited for Mr. Bennet to pronounce his judgment.

“This is good, Collins, very good. I will speak to the magistrate straightaway.” He paused heavily, then added, “Of course, our client is not innocent.”

“Yes, he is. I’ve just told you, sir.” Collins smiled at Mr. Bennet in a condescending manner that Lizzie positively loathed.

Lizzie’s greatest strength was the quickness of her mind, but her greatest weakness, according to her mother, was the quickness of her tongue.

“Our client is *Mrs. Davis*,” she proclaimed loudly, unable to stand it any longer. “And *she* is most certainly guilty.”

Truly, the amount of patience Lizzie had to exert in this office was immeasurable.

Collins should have been embarrassed by his fumble, but he didn’t appear to be. In fact, he didn’t even turn to acknowledge the young woman who corrected him. “Mr. Davis, Mrs. Davis, who cares. I should think that Mr. Davis would be so indebted to us for securing his release from prison that he’d be willing to pay us a small fortune.”

“Don’t count on it. The nature of marriage is mysterious, and besides, Mr. Davis may not have the funds.” Mr. Bennet sighed.

“Papa, James Davis is the younger nephew of a baronet,” Lizzie interjected. “By marriage, but . . . perhaps he will be grateful to the firm for keeping his relative’s name out of the mud.”

Lizzie let the suggestion dangle, enjoying the way that Collins’s eyes bulged with shock. “How do you know that?”

“Mrs. Davis told me herself. Did she not mention that when you called?” Lizzie let her stare dig into Collins, hoping for some veil of regret or shame, but finding none, she turned back to her father and said, “It’s quite marvelous, the things one hears when visiting Miss Lucas.”

“Visiting Miss Lucas” was the code phrase that Lizzie and her father used when Lizzie helped out around the office. Longbourn & Sons, though well established and of good reputation, was not a flourishing business. Between Mr. Bennet’s preference for studying the law rather than practicing it and his bumbling junior partner, the firm struggled, even with Lizzie’s assistance behind the scenes.

“Very good,” Mr. Bennet said. “Step into my office, if you please, Elizabeth.”

Lizzie was all too glad to sweep past an irritated Collins and into her father’s office. It was frightfully messy and her favorite room in all the world. It always smelled of ink and paper and rich pipe tobacco, which her mother strictly forbade her father from enjoying at home. The surface of the great oak desk was covered in books, papers, and a good number of half-empty inkpots. Although the mess itched at Lizzie’s inclination for order, she loved everything that this room represented—knowledge, hard work, quick thinking, the pursuit of justice. The cases that unfolded in this room were far more fascinating to her than any drama that occurred in the drawing room.

“Papa,” she began once they were seated, “Mr. Collins has been lying again.”

“Of course he has. Do you think that I’d believe for an instant Collins would call upon Mrs. Davis? He doesn’t have an enterprising bone in his body.”

Lizzie smiled. Good, this was going to be easier than she’d thought.

“However, you mustn’t goad him in front of the others, Elizabeth. He will be their superior one day, and it does no good to make him look a fool.”

The smile slipped from Lizzie’s face. This argument again. “Mr. Davis was going to hang, and Mr. Collins would’ve done nothing to stop it. I only told him because you were out, and the hearing is set for tomorrow.”

“Is that the only reason?” her father asked.

Lizzie cast her gaze at a smear of ink on the wood of the desk. Her father was likely out of blotting sand again. She had better stop by the stationer on her way home. “No. I heard him say nothing was to be done as I came in—with *my* evidence—and I couldn’t help it. Disagreeing with Mr. Collins is entirely too enjoyable.”

“It is one thing to be right,” Mr. Bennet said, “but it is quite another to always be proclaiming it.”

“Anyone with half a brain could see that Mrs. Davis and Mr. Alston set poor Mr. Davis up, likely with the intent to marry once he was out of the way.”

“And we know you have far more than half a brain.”

“If that’s the case, then you should hire me instead of some stranger.”

Lizzie had intended to surprise her father, but he looked as if he had been expecting this change in topic. “Ah, you’ve been speaking to Charlotte?”

“I read the job advertisement myself,” Lizzie said. “As your unofficial accountant and assistant, I must advise you that hiring another person is not in the firm’s best financial interests right now.”

He picked up a stack of contracts that Lizzie herself had proofed and set upon his desk for final approval and signatures. “If Collins is to become a barrister and spend all his time in court, that will leave us short a solicitor. Better to bring someone on now, before we’re shorthanded.”

Lizzie ground her teeth so as not to say what she was really thinking: Collins was utterly useless. He was lazy and created more work than he shouldered. Lizzie and her father were constantly tidying up his messes. In her view, his failings as a solicitor—where he was merely expected to attend to legal matters outside of court—did not foretell success as a barrister, where he would be expected to represent clients in a court of law.

For whatever reason, her father refused to see the truth. It was as if he expected that attending an Inn of Court to become a barrister would transform Collins into a different man. Perhaps it was because Mr. Collins was the sole heir to the Bennet family business and much-diminished fortune. Perhaps it was simply because Collins was his cousin’s son. Either way, when Collins had arrived on their doorstep with a benefactress and passable letters of recommendation, Lizzie’s father took him in like the son he didn’t have.

“But if you must hire someone now, why not me?” Lizzie pressed. “I already do much of the work, and I could act as an unpaid apprentice until we’re turning a profit again and—”

“Elizabeth,” her father interrupted, “I can’t go against your mother’s wishes where your future is concerned.”

Both father and daughter sat up marginally straighter, as if simply mentioning Mrs. Bennet might summon her from thin air. The idea was quite absurd, since Lizzie couldn't remember her mother ever setting foot in Longbourn & Sons. The very act of entering the business might actually bring on one of those dizzy spells she was always on the verge of succumbing to.

"Mama means well," Lizzie said, which was really a generous way of saying Mrs. Bennet didn't know Lizzie at all. "But I don't wish to *marry* a barrister. I wish to be one. And I wish for your support, more than anyone's."

Mr. Bennet gifted Lizzie with one of his small, delighted smiles. Lizzie was certain she was the only one who saw this side of her father: lively and amused at small rebellion.

It was not spoken of, but it was no secret that Lizzie and Mr. Bennet had a special bond. Oh, her older sister, Jane, was lovely and polite and considerate and, if Lizzie were quite honest, the only one of the lot who would never embarrass their father. Her younger sisters, Mary, Lydia, and Kitty, were not interested in anything beyond the drawing room. Lizzie was certain that her father secretly wished she'd been born a boy, and while Lizzie had no complaints about being a young woman, sometimes she wished she weren't a young *lady*.

"It would be an unusual situation," Lizzie acknowledged. "But I'm seventeen now, and if I were your son, you wouldn't hesitate to offer me the position."

Mr. Bennet regarded her for a long moment, and Lizzie hardly breathed in the hope that he was considering her point of view. If he gave in on this one thing, then perhaps, *perhaps* he would allow her to one day train as a barrister. She would show up Collins in every way, if it would convince her father.

"I'm not overlooking your argument," he said finally. "Although your mode of persuasion relies a bit too heavily on pathos."

Lizzie would have laughed if their conversation had a different tone. Her father had been the first one to teach her about Aristotle's methods of persuasion—pathos, ethos, and logos. Pathos was a method of appealing to her father's emotions, which was exactly what she had been attempting to do. The barrister picked up on it, of course.

“Considering I have no authority or experience and cannot use ethos, I assume you would have me rely on logos,” she said.

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “If you can convince me that I should hire you using logic and facts, then I shall consider it. Which is a good offer, considering how much your mother will berate me for doing so.”

She wasn’t sure if he was simply humoring her, but Lizzie began to mount an offense anyway. “I solved the Davis case! Mr. Collins took my work. I am *more* than competent.”

“I assigned the case to *Collins*,” her father countered. “No, prove to me you are suitable for this job, and leave your contempt for Collins out of it.”

Lizzie turned this proposal over in her mind, torn between excitement at an opportunity and resentment that she must work doubly hard to prove herself worthy for something that Collins had merely been handed. She knew she should just accept it—it would be the best offer she would receive—but her instinct to argue kept her from doing so.

As if sensing Lizzie’s inner turmoil, Mr. Bennet leaned across his atrociously cluttered desk and added, “I do appreciate you, and your work on contracts is invaluable. And who knows? Perhaps marrying a barrister—one day, in the far future—wouldn’t be such a bad fate?”

Lizzie folded her arms across her chest. “I won’t marry Mr. Collins.”

Even Mr. Bennet looked terrified at the thought. “Oh heavens, no!”

Lizzie stopped at Charlotte’s desk on her way out, pausing to adjust her bonnet and pull on her gloves.

“Is he sending you home?” Charlotte asked quietly.

“Not precisely.” Lizzie knew that was where her father fully expected her to return. But she’d never convince him to hire her if she simply sat in her room and worked on her needlepoint. “He said that he’d hire me for the position, if I can convince him using *logic*.”

“Well, that should be easy enough for you,” Charlotte said, unflaggingly supportive.

Lizzie sighed. “The problem is that I’ve provided him with ample examples of why I am the best candidate. I do most of Mr. Collins’s work, I already know how the firm functions, I read most of the contracts. . . . What more must I do?”

Charlotte cast her gaze about for any lurking clerks and then whispered, “What if you take a peek at the incoming cases, the ones that haven’t been

assigned yet?" She slid open the drawer where she kept the inquiries for representation, filed by complaint type and sender. She waved Lizzie to come behind her desk and look for herself. "If you could find a few moderately difficult cases, preferably by those who could pay . . ."

"You're very sly," Lizzie said approvingly, and began flicking through letters. "This is why you're such an excellent secretary."

"I hardly think your father hired me for my ability to sneak about," Charlotte said.

"He hired you because he needed someone reliable and organized." Lizzie extracted a letter and scanned it before discarding it. Fidelity cases were so boring. "Now if only he'd extend his daughter the same consideration."

"Don't be so hard on him. I wouldn't work if I didn't have to, and if I had a father such as yours . . ."

"I know," Lizzie said, recognizing the longing in her friend's tone.

Charlotte was the daughter of a successful merchant and a beautiful woman from the West Indies. Their marriage had been quite the scandal at the time, but they passed away when Charlotte was just a baby and she was brought up by her father's business partner, a friend of Mr. Bennet's. She took the job at Longbourn when she failed to find a husband by the age of twenty-three, and not only was she organized and capable, but she was a great confidante to Lizzie. "But think of this—how marvelous would it be if you and I both worked here?"

Charlotte smiled weakly back. "Quite marvelous. So find your perfect case."

But their plotting was halted by the sound of a male throat clearing behind them. "Miss Elizabeth. Rifling through the files again?"

Lizzie started guiltily and rose from her crouched position near the file drawer. Collins stepped forward and made an admirable effort of looking down at her, which was difficult as Lizzie had a good three inches of height on him. "Mr. Collins," she said flatly. She stared him down and wondered if he felt anything for what he had done earlier—embarrassment? guilt? remorse?

"Shouldn't you be home sewing?" he asked in a flippant tone. His satisfied smirk told Lizzie all she needed to know about his supposed guilt—or lack thereof. "Or perhaps performing other tasks befitting your . . . position?"

When she was very angry, Lizzie found it best to count something—anything in sight—until she calmed down. She picked the gleaming brass buttons on Collins’s jacket—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . .

Ah, now she could respond.

“And what position would that be?” she asked.

“A lady, and an unmarried one at that.”

“I hardly think that my sex or my marital status concerns you.”

“Oh, but they might.” Collins held Lizzie’s gaze for longer than necessary, and Lizzie felt the greatest urge to try out some language she happened to overhear on one of her reconnaissance missions down by the docks. First, he had refused to do his job with Mrs. Davis, then he’d stolen her work without acknowledgment, and now he was implying some kind of budding relationship between them?

In the end, Lizzie chose insult by way of Shakespeare. It felt more dignified. “I do wish that we could become better strangers,” she said coldly.

It took Collins a moment to register her jab, and his faux polite expression darkened into open resentment. He reached behind Lizzie and slammed the file drawer shut. “These files are the confidential business of Longbourn and Sons, Miss Elizabeth!”

Lizzie felt her cheeks redden. “My father—”

“Oh yes, let’s go speak with your father about how you’re meddling with the firm’s business yet again.”

Oh, he had her there. Mr. Bennet had told her to leave Collins out of her argument, and how would it look if she marched back into his office not five minutes later, complaining that he was getting in her way? Lizzie longed to say something smart to knock the disagreeable smile off his face.

Before she could come up with something clever, the front door of the office was thrown open with a dramatic bang. Lizzie, Collins, and Charlotte all looked in that direction and saw . . . no one. But wait—no. Lizzie looked down. A short boy with the grime of a street urchin but smartly attired in a jacket and cap caught sight of her. He snatched his threadbare hat from his head.

“Beggin’ your pardon, misses,” he gasped in between massive heaves for breath. “I didn’t . . . mean . . . to startle . . .”

“Begone from these premises at once!” Mr. Collins thundered. Lizzie thought darkly it was likely the first time all week he had someone shorter

than he to order about. "This is a respectable office of the law!"

"Oh, stand down, Mr. Collins," Lizzie said, hardly able to keep her smile in check. "He's here to see me."

"What business would *you* have with an urchin?"

"Business that doesn't concern you!" Lizzie glared at Collins again before gesturing to invite the boy into the office. "Come along, Fred."

Fred was still panting when Lizzie ushered him to a vacant desk in the corner, so Lizzie guided him to the chair and fetched a glass of water. She had met Fred a few months earlier and so admired his observational skills that she occasionally employed him to report information to her, particularly if any gentlemen were ever led down Bow Street by a Runner. Longbourn & Sons needed all the help they could get rustling up business, and knowing who had been arrested before it reached the society papers was very useful.

Fred drank the water in a series of quick gulps. Lizzie knew she should let him collect himself before pressing him for information, but he had never before intruded past the doors of Longbourn & Sons to seek her out. A rush of excitement flooded Lizzie, the very same rush she'd felt when she had called on Mrs. Davis and uncovered the letter to her lover. Perhaps she didn't need to access Charlotte's drawer of inquiries after all.

Even so, in all her excitement Lizzie never could have imagined that when the boy had caught his breath, he'd look up and say, "Miss, there's been a murder."

Two

In Which Lizzie Forms a Plan



LIZZIE'S MIND WAS TUMBLING through possibilities. A murder case! This could be just the thing she needed. . . .

"All right, tell me everything."

"A gentleman by the name of Charles Bingley was taken to a magistrate this morning, at quarter to twelve. He was covered in blood."

"The charge?" Lizzie asked.

"Stabbin' his brother-in-law. A bloke by the name of George Hurst, apparently Bingley's sister is his wife. The way Bingley told it, he called on Hurst this morning but didn't wait for Hurst to come down. Went straight into his bedchamber, then he started hollering, and the valet rushed in to discover Hurst's body, and Bingley hunched over it."

Lizzie held up a hand to stop Fred from continuing. "They believe Bingley killed him right then and there? Were there any witnesses?"

"The butler and valet are saying he must have done it, miss, but they didn't witness the murder themselves. It was all chaos at the magistrate's. I did hear Hurst was stabbed with a fine penknife, and they're saying it must be Bingley's. Mr. Bingley claims Hurst was already dead and he tried to revive him, and that's why he was covered in blood. But let me tell you, he made for a frightful sight."

"I can only imagine," Lizzie murmured, but she was already mentally working through the case. "What did the magistrate have to say?"

“He didn’t believe Bingley for a second. Ordered him to Newgate and declared there’d need to be a hearing.”

“Excellent,” Lizzie said, although of course it was not excellent for Mr. Bingley. “And Bingley—do you recognize the name, Fred? I have heard it socially, but what is his business?”

“Shipping,” Fred noted. “He owns all of Netherfield Shipping. A fellow in the court said that Hurst worked for Bingley.”

Interesting. Perhaps a business deal gone wrong? A family dispute? The facts were scant.

“You did very well, Fred,” Lizzie said, and extracted a sixpence from her reticule. She gave it to him and said, “There will be more of that if you can provide me any further details on the case—gossip, even. Anything will help.”

“Cheers, miss.” Fred exited the office with a grin stretched across his small face.

Lizzie made a hasty departure herself, and once out on the busy street, she turned toward home. Her mother would prefer to hire a carriage to ferry her about town, but Lizzie relished the two-mile walk and the weak spring sunshine warming her face. The offices of Longbourn and the Bennets’ home were both in Cheapside, a bustling neighborhood full of shops, merchants, and bankers, where there was always someone Lizzie knew ducking into a coffee shop or stepping out into the street. The atmosphere was overall pleasant and industrious, although it was the sort of neighborhood that the rich chose merely to visit but not to live in. Mr. Bennet would not hear of taking up residence in a quieter, more fashionable neighborhood, although Mrs. Bennet regularly begged him to consider it. The proximity to London’s Central Criminal Court and his bookseller was too convenient.

As Lizzie walked the familiar route, she pondered. She got her best thinking done while walking the streets, muddy and messy as they were, and this case was puzzling. The law of the land declared that innocence had to be proven, but Lizzie often found herself needing to be convinced of wrongdoing. She longed to know the context of this case—what was so urgent that Bingley had entered Hurst’s bedchamber? Where had Mrs. Hurst been? What was the family relationship like? What was their standing in society?

Lizzie did not balk at these questions. Her father told her to convince him she was worthy of a real job by using logic, but Lizzie knew that if men allowed themselves to be swayed by pure logic, women would be in Parliament! No, Lizzie would have to show not only that it made logical sense for her to fulfill the position but that she was more *capable* than any man.

And what better way to do that than by taking on a murder case?

The Bennets lived on Gracechurch Street, and when Lizzie arrived home she was met at the front door by Jane, who took her bonnet and gloves and asked, “Well? How did it turn out?”

It took Lizzie a dizzying moment to realize that her sister was asking about the Davis case. Lizzie was already well beyond that, but she collected her thoughts and said, “Papa will take my evidence before the judge this afternoon.”

“Splendid,” Jane said, smiling with satisfaction.

“Although it won’t be *my* evidence.”

Understanding dawned slowly. “Mr. Collins?”

Lizzie nodded and quickly explained before concluding, “I shouldn’t have breathed a single word to him.”

“You had no other choice. A man’s life was at stake, and Collins was doing what he does best—bungling everything.”

Lizzie smiled. “Why, Jane! How very unladylike of you to say so.”

“A lady never lies,” Jane stated with a faux haughty tone she shared only with her sister, which made Lizzie grin, albeit briefly.

“Papa knows the truth,” Lizzie said, then sighed. “And I suppose that should be all that matters. Except, oh, Jane! There’s news. A murder!”

“Good Lord!” Jane cried in horror. “Who? Someone we know?”

“No, a Mr. Hurst,” Lizzie said, and quickly shared what she knew of the case.

“That’s positively horrendous,” Jane said. “That poor family.”

“Yes, the poor family,” Lizzie agreed, feeling a stab of guilt that her first reaction had been excitement, not sorrow. It was rather easy to forget, in the flurry of the moment, that a murder meant more than questions unanswered and a case to be solved and collected upon. It meant grief, funeral arrangements, and lives upended.

So Lizzie tried to temper her tone when she said, “However . . . a case such as this will definitely demand legal advice,” and proceeded to tell her