



ALIX JAMES

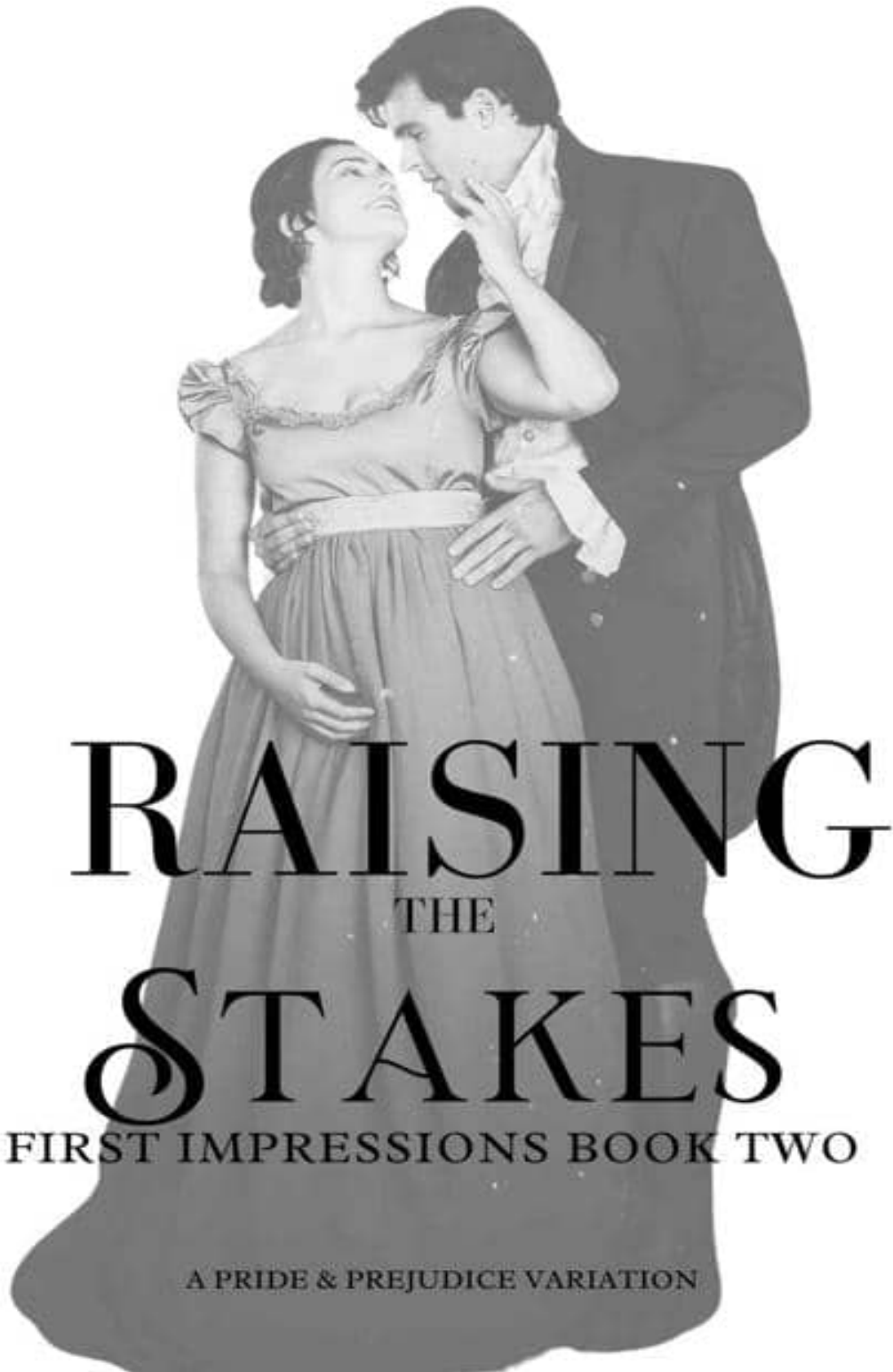
RAISING
THE
STAKES

FIRST IMPRESSIONS BOOK TWO



A PRIDE & PREJUDICE VARIATION

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-957082-47-9

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For Marty



CHAPTER ONE



Derbyshire
September 1812

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF me!” Broadshaw shoved his opponent hard enough to send the smaller man stumbling back. The other man, dressed in the fine but mud-streaked coat of Miles Stanton’s steward, recovered quickly, his face twisted with rage.

“You will regret this, Broadshaw!” the steward barked, lunging forward. “You think you can raise a hand to a servant of Miles Stanton and walk away? I will see you hauled before the magistrate before the sun sets.”

Broadshaw surged forward again, his fists raised, but another farmer stepped between them, his arms outstretched as though to hold them both back. “Stop it, Broadshaw,” he said. “Think of your family.”

Broadshaw ignored him. “You come onto *my* land and accuse *my* son of poaching? My boy was out with the sheep on grazing land we have used for generations! You think I will let you put up fences where they do not belong and let you take what is not yours?”

The steward adjusted his coat and pointed a finger at Broadshaw. “Your son was where he had no right to be, Broadshaw. That land belongs to Miles Stanton now, and if the boy sets foot there again, it will not be the sheep we are hauling off to market.”

Broadshaw’s face darkened, his fists trembling at his sides. “Do not think you can scare us into giving up our rights, Stanton’s man. You put your fences where the law does not allow, and then you have the gall to come here and call us thieves?”

Darcy swung down from his horse, the reins slipping from his hands as he strode toward the commotion. His presence drew the eyes of several onlookers, but no one moved to intervene. Stanton’s steward squared his shoulders and jabbed a finger toward Broadshaw.

“This man struck me, Mr. Darcy,” the steward said, his voice ringing with indignation. “You saw it. I demand he be taken before the magistrate. Sir Frederick will not stand for this lawlessness.”

Darcy stepped into the circle, his gaze fixed on the steward. The man’s bravado faltered under Darcy’s stare, though his mouth pressed into a defiant line.

“Broadshaw, step back,” Darcy said, his voice steady. Broadshaw hesitated, his fists still clenched, but then took one slow step away. His eyes, blazing with fury, remained locked on the steward.

Darcy turned to the steward. “You will leave. *Now.*”

The steward blinked. “Leave? This man assaulted—”

“I said *leave.*” Darcy’s tone was calm, but there was steel beneath it. He took a deliberate step closer, forcing the smaller man to crane his neck to meet his eyes. “You are on my land, delivering threats to one of my tenants, and I will not have it. If you wish to report this incident, you may do so through the proper channels. But understand this: if you press charges against Broadshaw, I will personally ensure that every aspect of Stanton’s dealings in this county is brought under scrutiny.”

The steward opened his mouth to retort, but no sound came out. Finally, he gathered himself enough to speak. “Stanton will hear of this.”

“I am counting on it.”

The steward’s lips thinned, and he glanced around at the gathered crowd, as if realizing for the first time that he was outnumbered. He straightened his coat, muttered something unintelligible under his breath, and strode toward his horse, his boots sinking into the muddy path. Within moments, he was mounted and riding away.

Darcy turned back to the farmers. Broadshaw stood rigid, his jaw clenched, his chest heaving with restrained fury. The crowd remained silent, their eyes darting between Darcy and Broadshaw as though waiting for one of them to erupt. Darcy shook his head. “You have jeopardized your position. Had Stanton’s man pressed charges, there would have been little I could do to stop the magistrate from ordering your arrest.”

Broadshaw let out a bitter laugh. “And what does my position matter when Stanton is taking it all anyway? They fence *our* grazing fields and send their men to intimidate us when we protest. Do you think the law will save us, Mr. Darcy?”

“I think violence will destroy you,” Darcy said. “And if you persist in attacking Stanton’s men, you will lose the small ground you still have.”

“The law is not on our side! If it were, none of this would have happened.”

Another man, younger and leaner, stepped forward from the crowd. “They talk in the villages,” he said. “They talk about France and how it started. If Stanton pushes us too far, what choice will we have?”

Darcy felt the spark of those words, like the sizzle after a lightning strike, as they settled over the group. The murmurs that followed carried an edge that sent a chill down his spine.

“You think rebellion will solve this?” Darcy asked, his gaze sweeping the crowd. “Look to France, and you will see only ruin. Families torn apart, cities burned, blood spilled for generations.”

“And what would you have us do?” Broadshaw demanded. “Stand here until we are starved out? Do nothing while they take everything from us?”

Darcy exhaled slowly. “I will speak with Stanton’s steward. I will see what can be done.”

“You think he will listen? His men have been at our farms, marking fences like we are cattle for slaughter. They say the land is his now, that the grazing fields are closed. They even dragged my boy off when he tried to herd our sheep across the old paths.”

Darcy looked at the man he had shoved, Davies, who now stood silent, rubbing at the sleeve of his coat as though it pained him. Broadshaw’s words hung in the air, and several others murmured agreement. The muttered discontent spread through the small crowd like kindling taking flame.

“You believe I am the one with influence over Stanton? That I can dictate his decisions, when the law—”

“The law is nothing but a cudgel for men like him!” Broadshaw interrupted, stepping forward. “Do you think we are fools, sir? Do you think we do not see what is happening? They tell us it is all for progress. But progress leaves us empty-handed while their coffers grow fat.”

A murmur of approval rippled through the group. One of the younger men standing near the back stepped forward, his face taut with a mixture of defiance and desperation. “And what are we supposed to do, then? Bow and scrape? Watch our families starve? You tell us violence is not the answer, Mr. Darcy. Tell us, what is?”

Darcy looked at him. The young man was perhaps nineteen, his frame still awkward with youth, but his gaze burning with something dangerous. Darcy thought of the mobs in France, of the fires that swept through the cities and left only ash in their wake. “Violence will only bring soldiers to your doors,” Darcy said. “And soldiers answer with blood.”

“That is what they want you to say,” Broadshaw shot back. “That is what they want us all to believe, so we will roll over like sheep and accept it.”

Darcy turned his gaze back to Broadshaw. The man’s shoulders were set in defiance, but his hands trembled where they hung by his sides. There was no strategy in his rebellion, only despair.

“You believe I am the one holding you down? That because I stand here with an estate and the duty to steward the land, I am the same as Stanton? Let me assure you, I am not.”

“And what difference does that make?” Broadshaw’s voice cracked as he stepped closer. “You are comfortable at Pemberley. You have your land, your family, your fine house. We have nothing but promises, and promises do not feed our children.”

The younger man spat on the ground. “France happened because of men like Stanton, because of men who turned their backs on the people. If the gentry will not listen, sir, we will find ways to *make* them listen.”

Darcy felt the air shift, the gathered men nodding, the agreement unspoken but clear. He thought of Georgiana, of the people at Pemberley who trusted him, who expected him to ensure their safety and prosperity. He could see the faces of those who had fled to the towns, abandoning generations of work because there was nothing left for them.

”I *will* speak with the magistrate, Sir Frederick,“ Darcy repeated. “I will make it clear that these grievances must be addressed.”

“You will speak,” Broadshaw repeated. “And what then? More talk? More promises? It will not be enough, Mr. Darcy. Mark my words. It will not be enough.”

Darcy did not flinch. He kept his eyes steady on Broadshaw’s until the man broke away with a muttered curse. The younger man lingered for a moment longer, his stare hard and unrelenting. Then he, too, turned and walked away.

As the men dispersed, Darcy stood in the center of the clearing, unmoving. A single thought burned through his mind. It was not the defiance in their words or the bitterness in their faces that disturbed him most. It was the undeniable truth behind them.

He could not stop this from coming. Not by standing still.

Darcy returned to his horse and mounted without a word. His steward approached, his expression anxious, but Darcy raised a hand to silence him. He would think on this later. He would decide what must be done.

For now, the only certainty was that he would not sleep that night.



DARCY STEPPED INTO THE library, the air thick with the remnants of a dying fire. His cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was already leaning against the mantle, arms crossed, wearing his “colonel” expression. His uniform was as neat as ever, but his boots were caked with dust, as though he had come straight from the road without pause. Darcy closed the door with more force than necessary.

“You sent no word of coming,” Darcy said, walking to the decanter on the sideboard. He poured a glass, ignoring Richard’s raised eyebrow. “I thought you were still in London.”

“Would you have responded if I had?”

Darcy swirled the liquid in his glass. “What is it this time, Fitzwilliam? More tales of revolution from your travels? More speeches about the duty of the privileged class to preserve the order of society?”

Richard pushed off the mantle and walked to the table, where a stack of correspondence lay untouched. “I have no speeches for you today, Darcy. Only facts.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Does it? That is what I was hoping for. I had word from Sir Frederick that there was some little ‘misunderstanding’ between one of your tenants and Miles Stanton’s steward.”

“There was. Sir Frederick was kind enough to promise to speak with Stanton himself. I hope that shall be the end of it.”

“You know better than that, Darcy. Six months... eight incidents. Stanton’s men are throwing their weight around.”

Darcy did not respond. He took a measured sip of his drink and gestured for Richard to continue.

“Miles Stanton,” Richard said, “has held his seat for two decades by playing both sides—just enough to appease the gentry, just enough to quiet the rabble. But things are changing. You saw it yourself this week, did you not? The farmers are no longer whispering about their grievances; they are shouting them.”

Darcy set the glass down with a deliberate clink. “And what would you have me do about it?”

Richard’s gaze sharpened. “Stanton is not invincible. He used to be—five years ago, his position was unassailable. Even your father could say or do nothing against him, but he has become complacent. His allies are still numerous, but they are starting to dwindle, and there are men—young men—who would see him replaced. Men who look to you, Darcy.”

“I am not a politician.”

“No, you are not. Bloody miserable politician you would make, if you ask me.”

Darcy grunted. “At least we are in agreement about that.”

“But you are a man with influence, with connections, and with the respect of those who matter. These younger landowners, they do not have the weight to stand against Stanton alone. But with you? With my father behind you?” He stepped closer, his tone lowering. “You could unseat him.”

Darcy turned away, staring at the unlit candelabra by the window. “And why would I want to? To leave Pemberley, to embroil myself in petty debates and alliances? The cost of this—of leaving what I know, what I value—would be far too high.”

“And the cost of doing nothing? Have you considered that? I heard all about what happened, Darcy. A man’s son was threatened—a boy who, by all accounts, was doing nothing wrong. That was not discontent. That was desperation. And enough desperation leads to fire, to blood, to chaos. Stanton’s greed has made him blind to the storm he has sown. If someone does not step forward, that storm will come here, to Derbyshire, and could even spread.”

Darcy turned sharply, his expression taut with frustration. “You are asking me to abandon my life for a world of schemes and manipulation. To stand against Stanton, I would need more than influence. I would need allies, support, and—”

“You have them,” Richard interrupted. “You have Lord Matlock, who can rally the old guard. You have the respect of men who are tired of Stanton’s games. You have your tenants, who trust you more than they trust their own neighbors.”

“And I have my father’s legacy to uphold,” Darcy snapped. “He did not send me to Eton and Cambridge so I could become a puppet for political maneuvering.”

“No one is asking you to be a puppet. They are asking you to be a leader.”

The silence between them was thick, broken only by the crackle of the fire as Richard stepped back toward the mantle. Darcy remained by the window, his hands gripping the back of a chair, his gaze unfocused.

“Speak to my father,” Richard urged. “Hear what he has to say. If you still believe this is not your fight, then I will say no more.”

Darcy’s jaw tightened. “You will *not* say no more. You will continue to hound me, as you always do.”

Richard smiled faintly. “Probably. But you can hardly blame me for that.”

Darcy released his grip on the chair and straightened. “Very well. I will speak to your father. But I make no promises.”

“That is all I ask.”

Darcy crossed the room and rang the bell for the butler. When the man came to the door, he gave his order. “Prepare a carriage for tomorrow morning. I will be traveling to London.”

CHAPTER TWO



THE LAVISHLY APPOINTED ENTRY hall of Lord Matlock's London townhouse was a riot of light and sound, the kind of spectacle that swallowed people whole. Chandeliers glinted like stars overhead, their crystals catching every flicker of the candles beneath them. The hum of voices, laughter, and the faint strains of a string quartet floated through the air, and Elizabeth Bennet could feel the swell of the music already pulling at her feet.

Elizabeth adjusted the lace at her sleeve for the third time in as many minutes and glanced sideways at her aunt. Mrs. Gardiner looked equally uneasy, though she disguised it better, her posture straight, her chin lifted. Her uncle, in contrast, seemed to fit the scene with ease, exchanging pleasantries with a gentleman by the doorway as if they were old friends.

The invitation had arrived only two days before, as much a shock as a delight. Mr. Gardiner's recent success brokering a complex trade agreement across the Channel had brought him to the attention of Lord Matlock himself, an acknowledgment so unexpected that Elizabeth had nearly dropped the letter when her aunt handed it to her. The earl's gesture—inviting them to this gathering of London's elite—seemed both a reward for Mr. Gardiner's hard work and a challenge to their place in society. Could they withstand such scrutiny?

Elizabeth had overheard her aunt say as much to her uncle that morning: “It is not only an honor; it is a test. We must give them no cause to think us unworthy of the company.” That thought had stayed with Elizabeth, its sharpness piercing her like the stiff new stays she had reluctantly tightened to perfection earlier that evening.

Elizabeth smoothed her skirts and tried to ignore the tiny tremor in her hands. She had never been so determined to disappear into the background of a room, but the sheer opulence around her made it feel impossible.

“Do not fidget so, Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner murmured, leaning closer. Her tone was firm, but her eyes betrayed her own nerves. “You are drawing attention.”

Elizabeth swallowed. “I am *trying* to look inconspicuous,” she whispered back. “I fear I am failing spectacularly.”

Her aunt gave a wry smile. “I was hoping Miss Fletcher would be here. She knows some of these people. It would have been easier with some introductions.”

Elizabeth only stared about, glassy-eyed. Her aunt’s newly hired “companion,” functioned more as an assistant, helping Mrs. Gardiner to sort papers for Uncle Gardiner’s warehouses. Uncle had been urging her for some time to either pass the duty on to a clerk or find some help, and Anne Fletcher had provided a perfect solution to the trouble. But Miss Fletcher had been kept at home this evening by an inconvenient and rather violent stomach ailment. And so, they must do without the help of feminine introductions.

But they were not ignored for long. A liveried servant approached them, inclining his head crisply. “Mr. Gardiner, I believe? Lord Matlock requests the pleasure of your company in the main drawing room,” he said. “He would like to meet your entire party, sir. If you would follow me.”

Elizabeth’s pulse quickened as they were led through a gilded archway and into a space that seemed even grander than the one before. The drawing room was enormous, its high ceilings adorned with intricate plasterwork and frescoes of pastoral scenes. A sea of elegantly dressed men and women

mingled beneath them, their movements fluid and practiced, as if they had rehearsed this very tableau for years.

Her uncle gestured for her to follow, and she clung to his side like a lifeline as they navigated the crowd. The sheer number of unfamiliar faces was dizzying, but a few names reached her ears as her uncle whispered them under his breath. “Lord Cowper... the Duke of Somerset... ah, and there is the Earl of Matlock himself.”

Elizabeth’s eyes darted toward a tall, silver-haired man standing near the far wall. His presence was commanding, his stance relaxed but watchful, as though he were both host and sentinel. He was deep in conversation with another gentleman, who carried an air of importance despite his unassuming appearance.

“That,” her uncle continued, his voice lowering, “is Monsieur Lapointe, the French minister.”

Elizabeth’s stomach flipped as she looked at the shorter man. She had heard whispers about the Frenchman during the carriage ride over—hushed remarks about secret negotiations, delicate matters of diplomacy, and a web of intrigue that seemed far removed from her quiet life in Hertfordshire. He was in all the gossip rags, and seemed, on the surface, to be on good terms with his British counterparts, though everyone had something else to whisper behind his back. Seeing him now, she was struck by how ordinary he seemed, with his thinning hair and plain black coat. And yet, the way others kept a careful distance spoke volumes.

Her uncle drew closer to Lord Matlock, bowing slightly as he introduced himself. Elizabeth and her aunt curtsied in turn, murmuring polite acknowledgments as the Earl greeted them with practiced charm. His sharp blue eyes flicked briefly to Elizabeth, and she felt an odd sense that he was weighing her somehow, measuring something unseen.

“The Gardiners, of course,” he said. “You are most welcome. I trust you are enjoying the evening?”

“Very much, my lord,” Mr. Gardiner replied. “It is an honor to be included in such an august gathering.”