

“Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart.” —Chapter XIX

EXCERPT from “THE HOUSE PARTY”

Jenetta James

PART I: THE EVENING

Lizzy and Jane had arrived after luncheon, just as the thin winter sun broke through the clouds over Netherfield Park. Jane had been quietly hoping that Father might get the motor out, but in the end, Bridges took them in the cart. Save for her sister’s embarrassment, Lizzy didn’t mind. She relished the feeling of the wind in her hair and cared not a jot what people might think. The rickety, old contraption clattered up to the house and deposited them like packages at the bottom of the great stone steps. There had been nobody to meet them, but no matter. Within a moment or two, a maid appeared and then the butler, and more besides. Servants seemed to pop up like flowers which made a change from Longbourn. A tall, rather dashing footman picked up their bags and vanished like a phantom. Neither Bennet sister was artful enough to pretend anything other than bewilderment at such luxury. They were shown, wide-eyed, to the chamber they were to share. The room was enormous, vast. It had the most marvellous vantage point at the front of the house, and altogether they were quite thrilled. They were not the sort of girls to expect a set each.

“Oh, Lizzy,” gasped Jane as she placed her hat on the bed. “What a large party must be expected.”

She turned out to be on the nose about that.

They watched from their window as the gathering took shape. The enormous door below opening and closing, chaps going here and there. A positive army of servants, all clad in black and white, appearing and disappearing. A succession of motor cars roaring up the approach, glinting red, blue, racing green. Lizzy had never seen the like. She had read of it, of course, but that was different. How close to home they were, Lizzy reflected, and how far.

Dusk had begun to gather the light of the day, and Lizzy was standing at the window with her hair down. A shiny black motor drew up below, and a tall, rather handsome gentleman alighted. Dark hair, long limbs, swift confident movements. The first word that came into her mind was “fine,” and she wondered who he was, where he was from. Many men, she had observed, were well-looking enough. But few were sufficiently handsome to be noticeable at a distance, to engage one without even a word. He exchanged greetings with a footman and nodded to a man who must surely have been his valet. They moved aside, and he advanced upon the house as all the other guests had done.

But just before he ascended the steps, he looked up.

That face was well-drawn and lightly tanned. But his expression was not altogether a kindly one. It was proud, lofty, rather stern. “How odd,” thought Lizzy. His lips did not smile, and nor did they seem to want to. His eyes were most arresting, piercing even. Lizzy felt a jolt, a shocking zing of force chase through her. *Whoosh*. Her sense trailing her emotions, she stepped back from the glass.