



The Spinster

Worth the Wait

by

Carol Jeanne Kennedy



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Cover: *Madame de Pompadour (Girl in a Blue Dress)*, 1875-1880, by Edoardo Tofano (Italian, 1838-1920) Public Domain.

Dedications

To all my wonderful friends and family who helped me along the way in writing my novels. This book is dedicated to Don Knight, Billy Miller, Jean Gess, Carol Silvis, and Mary Burdick. Also, special thanks to Hennie Bekker whose musical compositions *Algonquin Trails* and *Stormy Sunday* provided the creative spark for *Winthrop*, followed by the rest of my Victorian Collection.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – There’s a Divinity that Shapes Our Ends	1
Chapter 2 – Neatham Park.....	14
Chapter 3 – Lizzy and Dr North	29
Chapter 4 – Lavenia and the Haworth House.....	59
Chapter 5 – A Wedding at St Paul’s Cathedral	73
Chapter 6 – Death Hath No Favourites	83
Chapter 7 – Professor Meir Offers a Proposal.....	102
Chapter 8 – Haworth’s Efforts to Secure his Son	113
Chapter 9 – Chaos at Tillyard Lodge.....	120
Chapter 10 – The Spinster Lizzy	136

Chapter 1 – There’s a Divinity that Shapes Our Ends ¹

“I beg your pardon, Mr Duffy,” cried Lizzy leaning out the window, “but, can’t you see my revered roses?”

Squinting, the old crossing-sweeper tipped his crumpled hat. “Beg pardon Spinster Doddridge, but I’m half blind anymore.”

Lizzy slammed the window shut with a thud. “Spinster Doddridge, indeed.” Glancing at her sister, she fretted, “It wasn’t so long ago, Emily, that one thought of a spinster as one who spins. And here we are *not* spinning, and yet we are regarded as spinsters.”

“I would hardly think that anyone should call you a spinster at seventeen, Lizzy, nor I at twenty.” She glanced at her sister’s open book. “I take it you are reading another love story? Hmm, *Madame Bovary*, is it?”

Lizzy snuggled their cat, Mimi, to her neck. “But haven’t you wondered why gentlemen never seek us out, Em?”

“You are ugly, and I am plain.”

“I am quite serious, Em.”

“Oh, stop fretting, Lizzy.” She set aside her sewing. “I have a feeling you will fall head over heels very soon.”

Tossing Mimi to her perch, Lizzy folded her arms, sighing deeply. “We simply must change our course.”

“Lizzy, need I remind you every time you toss Mimi to the wind, her claws rip the sofa.”

“Oh, who cares about that, Em, when we should care about finding a proper husband.”

¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 2.

“And take up orderly housekeeping? Sharing our worldly goods?”

Lizzy plopped down in her chair. “Ouch.” Reaching beneath her, she brought out a crumpled *Madame Bovary*.

Emily smirked. “*She* would know what to do.”

“I do not think we are that desperate yet.” Lizzy took in a weary breath. “Oh, were it not for the kindness of Uncle, we should starve.”

“You are very right, dearest.” Emily shrugged. “Short of hanging a “for sale” sign around my neck, I am at a loss as what more to do about it.”

“Come along with Lady Mary and me tomorrow on our afternoon ride. You know very well Regent Park is the place to be seen.”

“Hmm, Lady Mary, now there’s one for you, a sheer glass of nothingness if there ever was one.”

“You know very well we need her connections—if we are to find just the right sort of husband.”

“A lot of good she has done you so far, Lizzy dearest. No, I think I shall not ride tomorrow. Besides, I do not like borrowing their horses, they are much too skittish. Thank you, but I shall remain here, spinning.”

“Very well, Em, but I shall not, and from now on I will not leave the house looking like a dowdy old thing anymore. Indeed not.” Lifting her chin, she huffed, “I shall wear my finest dresses, smile all the more, and flirt outrageously. I swear it.”

“Indeed.” Emily shook her head. “Perhaps then Lady Mary may supply you with another scandalous book to add to your reading repertoire.”

* * *

The next afternoon as Lady Mary guided her mount into Regent Park, she hesitated. “Miss Lizzy, look there, it’s Lady Charlotte with her nephew, Lord Swarthmore and his bride.” As the Swarthmore’s sauntered past, Mary cupped her mouth, “I hear his lordship is a beast of a husband.”

“A beast?” Lizzy drew back. “Dear me, Lady Mary, one would hardly believe it. Why he looks all gentlemanly and dresses so fine.”

“Humph,” she held her hat as a strong breeze kicked up, “one never knows *beforehand* Lizzy.”

“Well, I aim to find a suitable husband *beforehand*, Lady Mary.” She tucked a loose curl behind her ear. “And one perhaps for Emily.”

“Two? Oh, you silly thing,” she scoffed. “What is suitability after all but good fortune.” Tapping the whip to her hand, she added, “Indeed, I knew from the beginning Roger and I were ill-matched, but Papa needed his financial security to enhance his own. You must know that happiness in a marriage is really luck after all.”

“Luck?” Lizzy stiffened. “Why, Lady Mary, it will be nothing of the sort for me. Have you not heard the old Arabian proverb: ‘Cast a lucky fellow into the Nile, and he will come up with a fish in his mouth.’² Now that is luck. But I assure you, my idea of finding the right sort husband has nothing at all to do with luck.”

“Oh, Miss Lizzy, you are such a ...”

Suddenly a dog came from out of nowhere and scooted between the hooves of Lizzy’s mount, yelping and snapping. As her horse reared, Lizzy struck her head on a tree limb. Knocked unconscious, she landed face first atop a hedgerow, narrowly missing the spiked wrought-iron fence.

“Oh, dear God.” Lady Mary slid from her mount. “Lizzy, Lizzy.”

The only other sound being the flap of Lizzy’s fancy petticoats as they fluttered in the breeze and a few gasps and murmurs from the passers-by. She remained motionless—her face buried in the hedge.

“Oh, dear me, someone, please help!” said Mary.

Shouts from the driver of a nearby carriage broke her cries, “Whoa! Whoa!” The horses’ hooves skidded on the uneven stones as a gentleman leapt from the carriage. “God in heaven, madam, what happened?”

“A nasty little pug frightened my friend’s horse, sir. As you can see, she was thrown.”

“Dreadful thing, indeed.” He took up Lizzy’s hand. “I am a doctor, madam. Please, if you would move aside.”

² Arab proverb. Quoted from *Dictionary of Quotations* by James Wood (1893).

Dr Edward North, the prominent London doctor, was on his way to St. James Palace, where within the hour, he was to be knighted by Her Majesty, Queen Victoria.

"She has a strong pulse," he said.

"Oh, thank God, sir." Wringing her handkerchief, Lady Mary nervously shuffled from one foot to the other.

Suddenly Lizzy's skirt began to billow wildly in the breeze, much like her inclinations toward life.

"Sir, whatever shall we do?"

"For one, madam, hold her skirt."

"Oh, but of course, sir."

Dr North shouted for his footman, Williams. "We must remove her from this bush." He lifted her head and grimaced. "Her face will be most untidy, I am afraid. I will take her shoulders, Williams, you take her ankles."

Grunting and groaning they successfully hoisted her from the bush.

"Gentle as she goes," directed the doctor.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Two policemen, all a flurry, hurried over. One held the intruding carriages back while the other thinned the curious crowd.

"I shall hold the door, sir," cried out a passer-by as he ran toward the doctor's carriage.

With great care, they situated Lizzy inside. Blood dripped from her forehead, cheeks and nose.

Straggling by, an old hag winced. "Hmm, 'er face looks like a cross-quilt, if you ask me."

"Doctor, I will hurry home for my husband and then straightaway to the hospital. Ah, to which hospital will she be taken, sir?" asked Mary.

"Victoria," he said reaching for the carriage door. "Do you know of her family, madam?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She has a sister ... and an uncle."

"Would you be so kind as to notify them?"

"Oh, indeed, sir, right away."

"Her name?"

"Elizabeth Doddridge. She is seventeen, sir." She found the doctor very handsome indeed. Waving her handkerchief, she cried back, "*Miss Elizabeth Doddridge, sir.*"

He touched his hat and climbed into the carriage. "Thank you, madam."

Now groggy, Lizzy's eyes fluttered open. She gaped at the stranger sitting across from her. As her eyes focused on the blood splattered all over herself and the gentleman, she promptly spit up on the prestigious Dr North.

* * *

There had been a great commotion at the Doddridge Townhouse as Lady Mary, and her husband, Sir Roger Lennox, broke the news of Lizzy's ghastly fall to Emily. Holding tight to her husband's arm, Lady Mary related the horrid details of what had happened—the great commotion being the over-exaggeration of Lizzy's condition.

Sir Roger rolled his eyes as he pressed Emily's hand. "My dear, I assure you, your sister is in no danger. Why, she is in very capable hands with the distinguished Dr North." He gestured toward the door. "Come now, Miss Emily, use our carriage, your sister has been taken to Victoria Hospital."

* * *

After a few days of convalescing, Lizzy was sent home with a nasty headache and her head wrapped in what looked like a white Indian tarboosh. She assured Emily that she felt well enough to rest in the sunroom, and while she dozed, Mimi flexed her nails into Lizzy's turban. The fire in the hearth had prepared into ashes, grasped for a puff of red spark; a sudden tumble of wood and the doorbell startled Lizzy awake.

Nan, their nanny-maid since forever, answered the shrill ringer. "Miss Lizzy is not to be disturbed"

Crouched behind her, Emily whispered, "Who is it?"

Nan swung the door open wide. "Just the Lennox's."

Emily's face blotted crimson. "Oh, oh, please do come in."

Lady Mary glared at Nan.

Sir Roger smiled. "Morning, Nan." He handed her his umbrella. "We don't mean to disturb Miss Lizzy."

Kicking the door closed, Nan frowned. "Indeed, she's been through a terrible ordeal and"

"Nan, please," said Emily with a sigh, "just bring us tea, will you?"

"Very well, Your Highness."

Lady Mary's face soured. "Did I hear correctly?"

Emily gestured toward the drawing room. "Do come in, won't you?"

As Nan approached the sunroom where Lizzy lay, she stuck her head in the open door. "It's Madame Bovary and the fat man."

Lizzy groaned, "Shush, Nan, they will hear you." Trying to unhook Mimi's claws from her turban, she winced. "Ouch."

"I'll toss her out the window."

"No, no, you won't. And mind your manners with Lady Mary, Nan. You know how important it is that I find a husband. Ouch."

Lizzy lay back down, and within a short time, she heard the tinkled rattle of Nan's tea tray coming down the hall. She called out in a loud whisper, "And leave the drawing-room door open."

Emily stood at the window fussing with the lace curtain when Nan entered. "The late morning sun is all a-bright, I would say." She dropped the curtain. "Imagine with all this rain we've had of late that I should dare complain of such a thing." She returned to her chair and smiled at the Lennox's. "How silly of me." She turned to Nan. "Just set it there, Nan. I will pour."

"So, tell us, Miss Emily, how is the patient?" The rotund Sir Roger grunted as he scooted back into the cat's favourite haunt.

Nan, in usual fashion, clanged the tray atop the table, mumbling, "The patient is *trying* to rest."

Emily frowned. "Nan, please, just tend the fire."

"Indeed, do not disturb her on our account, Miss Emily," said Lady Mary as she grimaced at the cat-haired, shredded chair her husband occupied.

While humming, Nan poked the embers. "Nothing like a nice fire on such a day, eh?"

"The doctor stressed complete rest," Emily added with a polite nod to her guests. "But we do expect her to be up and about tomorrow."

"Well, then," said Sir Roger, "that is very good news, very good news, indeed."

"Oh, yes, up and about, surely that must be so." Lady Mary examined the tiny chip on the rim of her teacup, sighing. "But after I visited her in the hospital, why, her hands and face are so damaged." She returned the cup to its saucer. "Sorry to

say, I am quite convinced that the chances of her now finding a wealthy husband are quite dim."

"Mary that's absurd." Sir Roger's double chin quivered over the smallish white cravat strangling about his neck.

"Not so very absurd, my dear," she corrected in a huff. "You wouldn't have looked at me twice if ..."

"Absurd." Tea vapours meandered up his nose. "Absurd."

Nan stood behind Mary with her hands on her hips nodding along with Roger.

Pulling in her chin, Mary countered, "Absurd? Indeed not, sir. Let me explain how that prickly bush, in an instant, diminished Miss Lizzy's chances of finding the best sort of husband." She patted Emily's hand. "Skin you know, my dear. Flawless skin is the key."

"Mary," said Roger, "how utterly shallow of you. It's not just the skin that matters at all."

Emily hemmed. "But of course skin is important, but ..."

"You see, Roger, Miss Emily understands that I do not mean to be cruel. She does not find fault with me."

He stiffened. "I do not find fault with you, Mary, but for heaven's sake, Miss Lizzy's face is merely scratched. She shall heal. Besides, Dr North says the scars should be minimal."

"Oh, but, but even minimal disfiguration will look horrid," said Lady Mary.

"Horrid?" Emily's face crinkled in despair. "Dear me."

"Indeed, there was that particularly deep gash from her left cheek under her nose to the other." Mary shook her head. "No, no. I can not see any *wealthy* gentleman in our society seeking her out now." She clanked the silver spoon aside the saucer. "Imagine all those nasty red lines running helter-skelter all over her face."

While Nan cleared away the tea tray, she grunted, "Well, dearie, you've got that nasty gash between your lips, and it seems you've done quite well for yourself."

Sir Roger gagged, sputtered, and sprayed tea all over the front of his wife's sunny-yellow satin day dress.

Emily ordered Nan from the room. "And close the door behind you, Nan." She shook her head. "Do excuse Nan, Lady Mary. You know how the social graces lapse when they age. I assure you, I shall speak to her."

As Nan shuffled past the sunroom, Lizzy stood in the doorway shaking her head in disgust. "Nan, how could you? Now I shall never find a husband."

Continuing past, she shrugged. "Ring when you're hungry."

When Lizzy heard the Lennox's leave, she tugged on the rope pull.

Nan shuffled in with a tray. "Well now, a little bread with marmalade, my dear Lizzy?"

"You can't sweeten me after your outrageous behaviour today, Nan. No, you will not make me warm to you."

"Indeed," she set the tray on Lizzy's lap, "but this marmalade is for special occasions."

Lizzy glanced at the treat. "Special occasions, humph. You're impossible, Nan." She reached for the sweetened slice of bread. "Mmm, my head feels as if it will explode. By the way, where have you hidden my hand-mirror?"

Just then Emily bustled in. "Dear me, you're lucky enough to have a head."

Lizzy glanced at her hands. "Along with Nan and my bloody face, I shall be doomed to this house for the remainder of my life."

"Indeed you will," agreed Emily. "Nan, you know very well not to insult Lady Mary. However, shall Lizzy find a husband without her most excellent guidance?"

Nan huffed, "Indeed, husbands, what are they good for but for making dirt." She shooed the cat off the marmalade jar with her elbow. "Mangy little monster."

"Nan, must you?"

"Yes, I must." She lifted the tray and started for the door. "I have much to do today besides picking cat hairs from the jam."

"Much to do? What could you be so busy about?" asked Lizzy.

"Uncle Henry is due in today, dearest," said Emily. "And we must ready his room."

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten." Lizzy stood. "Well, then, I shall join everyone at the table for dinner this evening. There is no need waiting on me a moment longer."

"I don't think that is such a good idea," said Nan nudging Mimi toward the door with her foot.

"Hush now, I am recovered enough." Lizzy folded her quilt. "Put the tray away Nan, and then come help me dress."

Later that afternoon as Lizzy sat in the dining room awaiting Emily and Uncle Doddridge, she sighed deeply. "I'm still a bit weary, Nan. I pray Uncle Henry wasn't offended that I didn't greet him at the door this morning."

"Oh, not at all." She glanced at the mantle clock. "He and Emily should be down shortly. We told him about your fall, he understood."

Dabbing her lips, Lizzy lifted her head. "What was that?" She looked around the room. "Dear me, did I hear a meow?"

"No," said Nan as she settled the tureen on the sideboard.

"Why, I'm most certain I did. Nan, you didn't toss Mimi out the window again, did you?"

There, on the window ledge looking in sat Mimi. "Meow."

When Nan opened the window and cooed for her to come, the cat hissed, scrambled over her shoulder, and scratched her way beneath the sideboard.

"Well, the ungrateful little monster," said Nan brushing cat fuzz from her shoulder.

Lizzy heard the doorknob squeak and sat up. Her hat lay atop her head, crumpled and drooping toward the soup tureen.

When the door opened, Mimi dashed out. "Goodness me," said Uncle Doddridge steadying his cane, "what's troubling the cat?"

Nan shrugged. "Hates rain, I suppose."

Emily shook her head. "You've been up to no good again, Nan." She took uncle's elbow. "This way, dear, you will sit next to Lizzy."

"Indeed." He shuffled to her side. "Well, well, Niece, I missed your usual happy greeting upon my arrival this morning." He rubbed his eyes. "Elizabeth, what are you wearing on your head?"

"Her funeral hat, Mr Doddridge, sir." Nan exchanged glances with Emily. "Thinks she'll startle you if you see her face."

With his cane, he lifted Lizzy's veil and winced. "Nan told me about your nasty spill." He dropped the veil. "Ghastly."

Lizzy gasped. "Uncle!"

"Niece," he chuckled, "I am happy to find you alive."

She exhaled heavily. "Yes, Uncle Henry, I suppose I am as well." She removed her hat and tossed it to the floor. "I glanced in the mirror this morning, gagged and promptly called for my funeral hat." She buried her face in her hands and sighed. "What man shall ever look at me now?"

"There there my dear," he assured her, "what are good looks after all but clear skin? Oh, I wish I had only such a face to overcome my woes."

"I beg pardon, Uncle, for I am nothing compared to the loss of dearest Aunt Lucille, forgive me."

He lowered his head. "I miss her so."

Nan pulled out his chair. "Here we are now, Uncle Henry." She brushed a few crumbs from the seat. "Your place, sir."

He rested his cane on the table and sat. His dry old bones creaked as he settled into the well-worn hardwood chair. "She was the best sort of wife."

Emily took up her napkin. "Oh, indeed, Uncle; we loved her so."

The sisters nodded in agreement.

"Very well, Nan, you may serve the soup." Emily pressed Uncle's hand. "You must come live here with us. Now that Cousin Lavenia has married and moved away, country life must be too lonesome for you."

"Indeed, and Neatham Lodge is too far away," added Lizzy.

Emily fluffed her napkin. "We are a wee family, Uncle, we must remain close."

He clasped his palsied hands in prayerful assembly. "I agree Emily, but I had hoped you two would come to Neatham, for my sake. I am an old man. London is too noisy. I hoped to live the remainder of my life in the country—in blessed peace. Surely I do not have long."

Neatham Park, north of the small river Wey, was situated in the ancient town of Holybourne—Emily and Lizzy's ancestral home—where they had been raised, and where their mother and father were laid to rest.

At their father's demise, the estate was entailed to his brother, Henry Doddridge. After his brother's death, he took in Emily and Lizzy, and a few years later, Aunt Lucille took in another niece, Lavenia. When Emily and Lizzy came of age, they moved into their uncle's London townhouse. Lavenia remained at Neatham Park until she married Rupert Haworth.

Emily shot a quick glance to Lizzy. "Why Uncle, we hadn't thought of returning to Neatham Park."

"But," chirped Lizzy, "we could certainly entertain the idea. A little time here in London perhaps, and a little time in the country would suit us all quite nicely."

Uncle glanced up at the portrait of his brother, Alfred. "Your father was a good man."

"Papa was indeed." Emily joined his admiring glance. "So good he was to us all, Uncle Henry."

"Indeed, my child, he so loved Neatham Park, our beloved home place. I must soon return." His eyes teary; he half-pleaded, "And, my dear Nieces, you must accompany me, stay with me there until ..."

Lizzy hugged him. "But of course, Uncle. Calm yourself."

"We will never leave you alone, Uncle," said Emily.

He kissed Lizzy's cheek. "On your aunt's deathbed, she made me promise to bequeath all her jewellery to you both."

Emily dabbed a string of drool from his lip. "Now, now, Uncle, you are too concerned over Aunt's things. I assure you, sir, Lizzy and I are in no hurry to secure them."

"But Lavenia is."

"Oh?" Emily's face wrinkled confusion. "Cousin Lavenia?"

"Has she caused you worry, Uncle?" said Lizzy.

"Some worry." He buttered his bread, clanged his knife alongside the plate. "Lavenia used to be such a pleasant child. We tried to warn her not to marry that rake, Rupert Haworth, but," he sighed, "she would not hear of it." He swallowed his bread. With a weary shake of his head, he added, "Lavenia had always lamented about spinsterhood. Had to wear just the latest style; be at the best parties; quite the sophisticate."

Lizzy squirmed. "Indeed, Uncle, I have found that the pursuit of a husband can be quite costly." She lightly ran her fingertips over the tiny scabs on her face.

He patted her hand. "Let them come to you, dearest. When a lady is desperate, it shows."

"My sentiments exactly, sir," said Nan ladling soup into each bowl.

"Yes," he lamented, "Lavenia shone so in her brilliant yellow dress that she apparently attracted the wrong moth."

Lizzy shuddered in her own yellow dress. "How unfortunate for Lavenia, sir."

"Your Aunt Lucille and I were so disappointed. Rupert gambles and drinks far too much."

"So we have heard, Uncle." Emily sighed spooning into her soup.

"But, sir, surely poor Lavenia had no inkling Mr Haworth was such a moth," said Lizzy.

“Such a moth, indeed,” said Nan as she placed a bowl in front of Lizzy. “Heard about him long before we got that troublesome cat.”

“Troublesome cat?”

“Ignore her, Uncle,” said Lizzy, “she’s being impertinent again.”

Emily blew over the steamy broth. “Uncle, we had no idea to what extent Rupert Haworth engaged in such activities.”

“Rupert and Lavenia have been at Neatham Park for the past month. They left only yesterday for London, returning to Haworth House.”

“But Uncle, I am confused. We thought they were travelling on the Continent? Rupert was to show her ...”

His hand began to shake violently. He dropped his bread. “Lavenia told me they may lose their furniture for collections.”

Emily gasped. “Collections?”

“Why, that is scandalous,” said Lizzy. “Dear me, sir, poor Cousin Lavenia, what must be done?”

He closed his eyes. “Indeed, I fear she will become quite desperate married to that man. Your Aunt Lucille must have had a premonition, for she ...” He hesitated, opened his eyes and shook his head. “Well, my dears, it is all quite impossible.”

Both sisters glanced up at him.

His voice lowered, “During a private tearful conversation, Lavenia informed me that her fortune was no more.”

Emily threw down her napkin. “No more? God in heaven, sir, her dowry was considerable.”

“Why, five thousand pounds at least,” said Lizzy.

His shoulders heaved. “And ... she is with child.”

Lizzy buried her head in her hands. “Oh, darling Lavenia.”

“Uncle, we must do something,” said Emily.

“I cannot think of any conclusion.” Tears pooled in his rheumy eyes. “Lucille would have known what to do.”

“There now, Uncle.” Emily kissed his brow and fussed over him. “Lizzy and I shall put our heads together.”

“We will?” said Lizzy.

“We will.” Emily nodded assuredly. “We will devise a plan, Uncle Henry. Do not trouble yourself another second, sir. Cousin Lavenia will not be left in the cold.”

“Oh, my no, Emily, no, no, she shall not be.” Uncle Henry’s bony little body sunk deeper into his chair. “Nieces, there is something more. Some very important information before I ...”

Emily rubbed his age-wrinkled soft pink hand. "Go on, dear Uncle."

"When at Neatham, I will have my attorney speak to you both."

"Very well, sir," she said with a nod, "very well."

"Is there something wrong, Uncle?" asked Lizzy.

He dabbed his mouth and slowly rose from his chair. "No, nothing is wrong my dears, just a few details to be sorted out. Now, if you will excuse me, I am really very weary."

Nan pulled his chair out. "Upsy daisy, sir."

He took up his cane and nodded to her. "I will lie down now."

Nan and the sisters helped him to his room. Lizzy and Emily covered his thin little body with their papa's old napping quilt. Each, in turn, kissed his brow and left.

"The room is cosy and warm, Nan. Thank you," whispered Lizzy as she eased the door closed behind them. "Dear me, I wonder what Uncle's attorney has to say?"

"His will. No doubt Uncle is leaving everything to me."

"You mustn't jest, Nan," said Emily. "We only have enough money left to live in relative comfort for a few more years, and soon with no gardener—I haven't the heart to ask Uncle for more."

"God in heaven, sister, how dreadful. How are we to help Lavenia with only pennies to our name?"

As the three entered the drawing room, Nan attended the fire. Lizzy found Mimi hiding behind the sofa and lifted her onto her lap. "Perhaps Uncle's attorney will speak to us in regards to Lavenia. Perhaps he had devised a secret plan himself; perhaps he wishes her to come live at Neatham Park as well—without Rupert."

"Hardly, Lizzy," said Emily, "she is a married woman you know."

Nan brushed soot from her hands. "Not for long."

"Not for long?" Lizzy looked puzzled. "Why, Nan, what do you know?"

"More than I can share with you two now."

"Nan, what do you mean by being so secretive? You must share with us what you know. How are we to help Lavenia?" said Emily.

"You will know soon enough."

Chapter 2 – Neatham Park

The very next week the Doddridge family and Nan were well on their way to Neatham Park. Nan's head bobbed on Uncle's shoulder.

Lizzy giggled. "Look at the two of them, one in tune with the other." She glanced out the window and sat up. "Wake, everyone, we will soon cross the Wey."

Nan squinted out the window. "About time."

Uncle continued to snore.

"Only a mile from Neatham Park now," said Lizzy as the horses thundered over the bridge. "It is such an ancient crossing."

"Indeed it is." Emily snapped open her fan. "Remember when Papa told us about the pilgrims passing over it on their way to Canterbury?"

Uncle coughed and sputtered awake. "Pilgrims, where?"

"We are but a mile from home, sir," chuckled Lizzy, "and there is not a pilgrim in sight."

"Uncle, I have been thinking of a plan this entire ride. Hear me out," said Emily with a sly smile.

"A plan?" he asked.

"Indeed, I shall write to Lavenia and invite her to Neatham for a visit—perhaps a month."

He rubbed his eyes. "And?"

She fanned her warm face. "Well, sir, to offer assistance in her delicate condition."

Lizzy nodded in support, but unaware of just what *plan* her sister had in mind.

"Go on," he said.

"Rupert would not leave London—what with his position at Heathrow. He owes far too much to risk debtors prison."

Lizzy lifted her veil. "Indeed, then we just may wean Lavenia from Rupert?"

"Oh, I doubt that," said Nan smirking.

Uncle Henry cleared his throat. "Indeed, Rupert will not get another penny from me."

"Perhaps I am better off without a husband," said Lizzy with a deep sigh.

Nan patted her hand. "There's a girl."

"I do hope Rupert does not cause you more grief, Uncle," said Emily.

"Despicable behaviour," said Nan.

Lizzy's nose flattened against the window. "Look, one of the hounds has come to greet us, the clever spotted one."

Emily stretched and yawned. "I would gladly trade places. I could use such a run."

The carriage ambled up the long gravel-bedded drive, and when they pulled under the Great House's brownstone carriage-porch, Maxwell, Uncle Henry's butler, stood waiting. "Good afternoon, sir. The house is in good order, sir."

Doddridge nodded. "Very good, Mr Maxwell." He gestured to Lizzy and Emily. "Come along, Nieces—come along, Nan."

Emily glanced around the Great Estate's magnificent flower gardens—old-fashioned flowers to be sure: primroses, pansies, stocks. She took in the always well-kept lawns, green and low. Horses grazed in the north pasture; gardeners raked and pattered; the sky was grey-white; water trickled in the portico's stone fountain. "Ah, it is good to be home, Uncle." She picked a yellow rose that grew very near the door—she supposed it wanted to live inside.

Lizzy glanced up at the name Doddridge carved above the door. "Home, Em." Tugging at her gloves, she entered sniffing the air. "A bit musty, though."

Emily tickled Lizzy's nose with the rose. "Fussy girl."

They followed Uncle Henry up the ancient oak staircase. With an affectionate kiss, they bid him good afternoon, "Until dinner, sir," they said in unison.

Lizzy entered her old room, the cosy atmosphere wrapped around her like a warm blanket. *Indeed, it is as I left it.* There came a light tap at the door. "Come," she said.

The maids, Mary and Helen, entered. One carried a fresh basin of water and the other a bucket of kindling to prepare the fire. As they went about their tasks, Lizzy sat at the open

window-seat and gazed about the lush pasturelands. From the north, she watched as a man, riding a white horse at full gallop, race toward Uncle's garden fence.

"Dear me," she leaned into the window seat to get a better look.

The horse jumped the old rose hedge with ease while his dogs yelped and scooted between its thickets. The stranger dismounted and left his horse to meander at will—the dogs followed alongside him to the stables.

Lizzy held her hand to shield the morning sun. "Who is that man, Helen?"

Leaning over her shoulder, she glanced out. "Dr North, our neighbour, Miss Lizzy. He acquired Tillyard Lodge last year."

"Really? A certain Dr North attended me most recently in London."

"Indeed, Miss Lizzy, with such comings and goings at the Lodge, why, we hardly know what to make of the old place anymore."

Lizzy lowered the curtain. "Humph, I should think him rather impertinent for riding so carelessly about Neatham Park, jumping this and jumping that."

"Oh, yes," Helen nodded as she poured the basin water, "yes, indeed, miss, very impertinent."

"Tell me, does he visit Neatham often?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Lizzy, every day."

"Every day?"

Mary poked the embers. "Dr North has bred his sire to your uncle's great mare, Phoebe, miss. The foal is due any day."

"Oh, but of course, now I remember Uncle mentioning it. How absent-minded I am." She continued to stare after Dr North.

Mary curtsied. "Will that be all, Miss Lizzy?"

"Just make sure Nan is attended ... you know, the best room."

"Oh, indeed, miss," replied Mary with a knowing smile. "She is there already."

Lizzy giggled. "Yes, I suppose she will have her way." Dipping her fingers in the water basin, she dabbed her face lightly and then slipped off her dress. She lay across the bed and stretched. "Mmm," she mumbled as she studied the portrait of her mother above the white stone hearth, *Mama, how we miss*