

Cousin Conundrum

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

Summer Hanford

CHAPTER ONE

Mr. Steven Hurst glanced about as he descended the steps of his carriage, his slightly stoop, disinterested demeanor calculated to cover how carefully he searched the street about him. General Prachet would have men watching the street outside his home, but Hurst's habit of care was too engrained to be denied, and another pair of eyes never hurt. Not that there was anything suspicious about a gentleman calling on another gentleman, which was all the world would see.

Hurst knocked, handing over his card as he entered, as any caller would, even though he'd been summoned by the general and was expected. The moment the door closed the butler's posture changed from the stiff shouldered haughtiness of an upper servant to the equally rigid but less supercilious stance of an officer.

He handed back the card. "The general is expecting you, sir."

With a nod, Hurst removed his hat and gloves, happy to be rid of them in the London summer heat. He passed them over, saying, "I know the way, Sergeant."

"Very well, sir."

As he strode unescorted through the London house General Prachet used as a front his clandestine position in the King's service, Steven reflected that they had either come to trust him, or viewed him as not posing any threat at all. Perhaps both.

He approached the door to the general's office to the sight of two footmen, their posture as suspiciously militant as the butlers, one standing on each side of the door. Sighting him, the nearest turned and knocked, saying loudly, "Mr. Hurst to see you, sir." Steven couldn't make out the rumbling reply, but the man opened the door and gestured him in.

No matter how many times he entered this office to the sight of General Prachet, a rather unassuming gentlemen of perhaps fifty, the utter military presence of the man always took Steven aback. Just as his staff were dressed as typical servants, Prachet was dressed as a gentleman, his clothing neither expensive nor threadbare. His office was done up like a typical study, just as Hurst had in his own home. Yet something, perhaps the exact placement of every piece of furniture, every book, or maybe the sheer number of right angles, cried 'military' to Hurst.

"Ah, Hurst, good of you to come," Prachet said, as he always did...and as if Steven had any choice.

For he hadn't. Not since his father and older brother were discovered to be traitorous Napoleonic spies, something Prachet had covered up, and said would remain thus, so long as Steven diligently served the Crown.

Regardless, Steven kept up the pretense by offering a nod and dropping into the chair across from Prachet at the man's gesture. "I always have time to call on a friend."

Prachet's answering smile was only a touch predatory. "Yes, you do."

"So, how can I be of service, *Mr.* Prachet?" Steven hoped it was nothing that would make him miss the theater with his wife. He was painfully aware that his duties kept him away from Louisa often enough that she'd grown convinced that he lacked true affection. That he'd married her for her wealth. While he would never quibble with twenty-thousand pounds, he had not even known of her considerably dowry when they'd first met at a truly boring recital, where she'd captured his heart with her dry observations.

"We need a man to work with the city watch."

Steven groaned. The watch was notorious for not wanting anyone from Prachet's special branch of the to interfere in their work. "Will that not be too high visibility for me?" Steven suggested with little hope. "I am, after all, a secret asset."

"You will not be in the field." Prachet pulled a face, an oddly human gesture for the man. "You have read about that spate of thefts we have been facing?"

"The ones where they get in and out, nothing broken, no one the wiser, always a widow's home, and always when she is out?" Steven had indeed taken note. More or less one London widow a month had been robbed, for over a year now. "That has been going on for some time. Why are you...we...getting involved?"

"You know the thieves targeted the cousin of a baron a few months ago?"

Hurst nodded. He'd read as much in the paper.

"Those to whom I report may have forgiven such a slight transgression against the peerage, but the most recent theft, one that will not make its way into the papers at her ladyship's request, took place at the London residence of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. I am afraid none of us will have any peace until she feels justice has been served."

Steven leaned forward, sensing a new argument that might get him out of working with the notoriously uncooperative city watch. "I have a connection to Lady Catherine, through her nephew, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley. Surely, there is too much risk of my involvement being discovered if I pursue this case."

"I am well aware of your connection, and deem it irrelevant." Prachet replied crisply. "You have not, to the best of my knowledge, met her ladyship. Nor, as I noted, will you be in the field. Simply acting as an advisor to the constabulary."

Slumping back into his chair, Steven nodded. It was not as if he actually had a choice. If Louisa ever found out that his father and older brother had been arrested, tried, and executed as spies, she would regret ever marrying him, and Steven wouldn't blame her. He kept a terrible secret. One with which no wife should be burdened. Especially one who'd accepted his hand in order to raise herself and her family in the society.

Obviously taking his change in posture as the acceptance it was, Prachet continued, "You will report to this location tomorrow morning." He slid a folded page across the desk. "Your contact is Sargent Fletcher. He has been advised to expect you."

Suppressing a sigh, Steven took the paper and tucked it into his coat pocket, repeating, "Tomorrow morning. Fletcher," to show he'd been listening.

"And I believe that, by morning, members of the watch mean sometime before ten."

"I am aware." How would he explain that to Louisa? Prachet so often had him trailing other gentlemen, going places only gentlemen could, that Steven had developed a reputation for staying out late at cards, and sleeping until noon.

He supposed he need not explain himself at all, but that would drive another wedge between them. He was digging a hole so deep, he would never be able to make amends.

Prachet reached for a folder and flipped it open, saying, "You have your orders." He dropped his attention to the contents.

As Prachet seemed to be done with him, Steven stood to bow. A salute would likely be more fitting, but not a military man, Steven didn't feel it was his place to give one. He turned to go, instinctively seeking the bright side of this new assignment. If he needn't follow about any gentlemanly-reprobates for now, searching for others who were as corrupt as his late relations, at least he could have dinner with his wife.

"Hurst," Prachet called.

Steven halted, turning back.

"Children. Considering them?"

Blinking at that change of topic, Steven nodded. "Someday." Once he managed to reconcile his work for Prachet with rekindling his wife's affection.

"Look, I know we have asked a lot of you over the years, but your father and brother committed quite serious acts of treason."

"I am aware," Steven said miserably. Keenly, sadly aware.

"Still, you have been at this for over a decade. Since, what, you were eighteen or so?"

Prachet knew very well that he'd been Steven's master for the past dozen years, so he simply nodded.

"Wrap up this case and we will call your debt paid. You have proven yourself an asset to England. It is high time you went about begetting more honest, honorable English gentlemen."

Steven stared at him, hope surging through him. "This is my final assignment?"

"If you succeed in bringing the thief to justice, yes."

"They swing, and my slate is clean? My family name is safe?" And Louisa would never know what she had married into.

"Precisely."

"Very well, sir." Steven bowed again, lower this time.

With a dismissive wave, Prachet returned his attention to the papers before him.

Lightness in his step, Steven strode from the room.